FIXING OR AFFIRMING HOMOSEXUALITY?

A discursive study of identity negotiations of same sex attracted persons within heteronormative Christian faith communities

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Social Psychology
Master's thesis
November 2020

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UNIVERSITY OF HELSINKI

Tiedekunta/Osasto – Fakultet/Sektion – Faculty	Laitos – Institution – Department	
Faculty of Social Sciences	Department of Social Research	
Tekijä – Författare – Author Saga Lydén		
Työn nimi – Arbetets titel – Title Fixing or Affirming Homosexuality? A discursive study of identity negotiations of same sex attracted persons within heteronormative Christian faith communities		
Oppiaine – Läroämne – Subject Social Psychology		
Työn laji – Arbetets art – Level Master's thesis	Aika – Datum – Month and year November 2020	Sivumäärä – Sidoantal – Number of pages 74 + 1

Tiivistelmä – Referat – Abstract

This study examines how same sex attracted persons negotiate their identities within or against heteronormative Christian faith communities. An account is given of the general cultural and religious context that same sex attracted persons in Finland are immersed in. Previous research on the same and similar topics is presented, following themes of wellbeing, stigma, identity conflicts, and ways of coping with, or resolving challenges related to these aforementioned issues.

For this study, seven participants were interviewed about their sexual orientation, religious conviction, affiliation with faith communities, as well as norms, ethics, and theology regarding sexuality. To understand aspects of identity, a critical discursive approach is applied to the analysis of the interview material. Interpretative repertoires relevant to the topic are discerned, after which positioning within these repertoires is examined.

The aim of this study is to shed more light on the ways in which sexual orientation is preformed and negotiated within a specific cultural and religious context. The participants are found to construct interpretative repertoires specifically regarding homosexuality. These relate to sexual and religious ethics, to various social repercussions, and to the idea of either changing or affirming non-heterosexual orientation. Different positioning occurs within the interpretative repertoires, of which some is problematic**.** The more problematic positioning and accounts raise concerns from a standpoint of wellbeing and social stigmatization. Hopefully this study can contribute to expanding and furthering the discussion on how persons experiencing same sex attraction could be helped within heteronormative faith communities, without being stigmatized within or outside these communities and without having their wellbeing compromised.

Avainsanat – Nyckelord – Keywords
Identity negotiation, same sex attraction, heteronormativity, Christian faith communities

Contents

1 Introduction

This study sets out to examine identity negotiation amongst same sex attracted persons who are, or have previously been, active members of Finnish Christian faith communities, in which only heterosexual relationships are condoned, and marriage is seen as an institution strictly between two people of the opposite sex. Participants of the study have been interviewed on their views on gender, sexual orientation, religious conviction, and affiliation with their Christian community. The objective was to discern interpretative repertoires relevant to the topic, and to see where within these repertoires the participants positioned themselves. In so doing, this study aims to shed more light on the ways in which sexual orientation is performed and negotiated within a specific cultural and religious context.

Depending on the context, I will use varying terminology when discussing sexual orientation in this study. When describing previous research, I will mainly use the same terminology that has been used in the studies in question. In the analysis, I will be using the terms *gay*, *homosexual*, *homosexuality*, *same sex attraction*, and *same sex attracted*, as these are the terms used by the participants of this study when talking about themselves. The term same sex attraction is used to describe attraction to a person of the same sex, without assuming specific orientation. It should be noted that people within Christian communities that do not condone same sex partnerships are often reluctant to define themselves as other than heterosexual, and might therefore prefer using other terminology, such as *dealing with same sex attraction* (DeBernardo, 2017). Gender is not the focus of this study, but nonetheless it is a relevant concept. Cisgender is as a term used to describe people whose gender identity matches their sex assigned at birth. Whenever specific terminology is not stated by either the participants or in the context of previous research, I will use the rather well-established abbreviation LGBTIQ+ to describe a variety of categorization regarding sexual orientation and gender. Throughout, I am aware of any terminology on sexual orientation and gender identity having its descriptive limitations and contextual specificities. Nevertheless, the focus is on the effects the heteronormative views on sexual orientation and marriage within the church community have on identity negotiations, regardless of preferred terms for describing sexual orientation. Other concepts and terminology used will be further elaborated on in the chapter on theoretical and methodological standpoints.

1.1 Churches in Finland and their Positions on Same Sex Marriage

Since March 1st, 2017, same sex couples have been able to legally marry in Finland. Yet so far, there are no churches in Finland that officially condone marriage of same sex couples, although Lutheran pastors technically are authorized to solemnize all legal marriages.

The Evangelical Lutheran Church and the Orthodox Church are considered state churches in Finland. The Evangelical Lutheran Church is somewhat divided on the issue of same sex marriage and does acknowledge same sex couples in many ways, for example by offering prayer services for their marriages (Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland, n.d.). The Orthodox Church in Finland does not acknowledge same sex marriages. Interestingly, archbishop Leo of Finland has given two very different outlooks on the prospect of change in the position the Orthodox Church on this topic in two interviews in 2015. Both are published on the webpage of the Orthodox Church of Finland (Suomen ortodoksinen kirkko, 2019a; Suomen ortodoksinen kirkko, 2019b). In their first interview, given in January 2015, the archbishop states that the current position of the church on marriage is not written in stone. However, in the second interview, given in May 2015, the archbishop states that one is not to expect change in the current position of the church on marriage. (Suomen ortodoksinen kirkko, 2019a; Suomen ortodoksinen kirkko, 2019b.)

The Catholic Church defines marriage clearly as a sacrament between a man and a woman. Its Catechism also takes a specific stand against homosexuality (Catechism of the Catholic Church, n.d.). Within Evangelical free churches in Finland, the official stance is also unequivocally against same sex marriage. Examples of some of the larger Evangelical free churches in Finland are the Pentecostal Church of Finland and the churches of the Pentecostal revival movement, the Evangelical Free Church of Finland, the Seventh-day Adventist Church in Finland and the Finnish Baptist Union. On the webpages of all of these aforementioned Evangelical free churches, one can find texts that clearly define marriage as a union specifically between a man and a woman. (Suomen Adventtikirkko, 2018; Suomen Baptistikirkko verkossa, 2015; Suomen Helluntaikirkko, 2011; Suomen Vapaakirkko, 2019.)

1.2 The Cultural and Religious Context of LGBTIQ+ and Same Sex Attracted Persons in Finland

A slightly longer introduction is warranted to familiarize the reader with the complex cultural and religious climate that same sex attracted persons find themselves in in Finland. This is to enable the reader to properly follow the material analysis and presented findings of this study.

Homosexuality ceased being illegal in Finland as late as 1971, and the classification of homosexuality as a disease was removed in 1981. In 2002, Finland's legislation changed, making it possible for same sex couples to register their partnerships. (Seta, n.d.) Around that time, there was an intense debate around the stance of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland towards homosexuality. Just a few decades before, same sex attracted persons in the church did not have much choice but to hide their sexual orientation, as there was no room for discussion on the topic. (Juva, 2003, p. 30.) Juva (2003) characterizes the attitude of the church towards homosexuals as having evolved from rejecting and judgmental into more nuanced and inclusive in the decades leading up to 2002 (p. 30–32).

Hanna Salomäki, a researcher of sociology of religion, has studied revivalist movements operating within the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland (Salomäki, 2010). Characteristic of revivalist movements is the idea of bringing back genuine, living faith into a church, which they view as a dead institution that has given up on its original teachings (Salomäki, 2010, p. 16). Since the church has adjusted its position on homosexuality towards a more permissive direction, this has brought on an increase in criticism from the revivalist movements, as they see the revised position as unbiblical (Salomäki, 2010, p. 336). On the other end of the spectrum, there is the Ecumenical Solidarity Movement, which has been working towards a more affirming and inclusive approach towards LGBTIQ+ persons within the church since 2000 (Ekumeeninen Yhteys-liike ry, n.d.). This is to point out that there is variety in the position on homosexuality within the Christian tradition in Finland, between different churches, denominations, and organizations.

Leena-Maija Rossi (2017) discusses the outcomes of queer activism in Finland since the 1990s, looking at issues of visibility, rights, and recognition of gender and sexual

minorities. While acknowledging the remaining need for progress on several accounts with LGBTIQ+ rights, Rossi states that the Finnish media discourse regarding gay rights has become more positive and affirming in the late 2010s. Rossi acknowledges a greater understanding of gender diversity and a decline in heteronormative assumptions, and points to signs of cultural acknowledgement and recognition, such as more non-heterosexual, non-binary characters in tv shows and movies. (Rossi, 2017.)

Yip (2007) infers that there is a greater resistance to progressive change regarding views on homosexuality within religious communities, compared to society in general. However, Juvonen (2015) points to the societal influence of the public statements of the leadership of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Finland, and of Christian politicians, especially within the Christian Democrats. Since the Lutheran Church is a state church, the statements its leaders make have a profound impact on the societal attitude climate as well as political changes with regards to gay rights. Juvonen (2015) asserts that every single legislative matter concerning the lives of gay persons in Finland has been turned into a public debate on the Bible's position on homosexuality, regardless of Finland being a rather secular country. (Juvonen, 2015, "Homoseksuaalisuudella politikointia".)

The positions of Finnish churches on same sex marriage give some insight into the particular challenges which same sex attracted Christians might face in their faith communities. However, the challenges are hardly limited to not being able to marry a partner of the same sex in a religious ceremony. There is also a lot of stigma and exclusion linked to same sex attraction and LGBTIQ+ categorization within Christian communities (Rodriguez, 2009; Yip, 1997). Rodriguez (2009) iterates a number of Bible passages commonly used to motivate views against same sex marriage and points to research on perceptions of non-heterosexual persons in the church. Within Christian communities, same sex attracted persons are often perceived, or perceive themselves, as sinful, unnatural or perverse due to their sexual orientation (Rodriguez, 2009).

Those unfamiliar with the significance of a personal faith, or being part of a faith community, might struggle to understand why non-heterosexual persons choose to remain in churches that view same sex relationships as sinful. O'Brien (2014) explains the power of a sense of belonging in a faith community as follows: "Religious acceptance and participation conveys legitimation within families, communities, and

societies." (p. xviii). For many people, it is vital to feel accepted in their faith community. In the case of same sex attracted persons, this need for acceptance and belonging, while being affiliated with a heteronormative faith community can be very challenging, especially if one also personally believes that affirming non-heterosexual orientation is wrong. The desire to match one's inner experiences with outer expectations lead some to opt for sexual orientation change efforts (Linjakumpu, 2015). These efforts can be described as treatments with the aim of changing or curing a person to regain their presumed heterosexual orientation and cisgender identity. Alternatively the aim would be to at least limit sexual behavior with same sex partners. These treatments are often a combination of therapeutic methods and spiritual practices. (OutRight Action International, 2019.) Christian groups and organizations providing and promoting reparative therapy are often referred to as ex-gay ministries. (Creek, 2014, p. 137.) According to Lumikallio (2011), Finnish faith communities do not have their own, independent ex-gay movement, but rather look to the ex-gay ministries in the United States as authorities in the field. In 2011, Lumikallio argued that there was only one Finnish organization which clearly included ex-gay ministry: Aslan ry (Lumikallio, 2011). Currently, Aslan ry operates as Journey Finland, and has no available statements on their position on sexual orientation change efforts. However, the organization reportedly welcomes people who seek various forms of healing with regards to sexuality and relationships (Journey Finland, 2013).

In a part of their book on spiritual violence in Christian faith communities in Finland, political science researcher Aini Linjakumpu (2015) focuses on the relationship between homosexuality and spiritual abuse. They state that the suppression of sexuality within heteronormative faith communities is not necessarily so much a question of direct abuse, but rather a structural problem. The approach to homosexuality is automated within the community; and constantly reproduced in its practices. (Linjakumpu, 2015, p. 128.) Linjakumpu (2015) questions whether engagement in sexual orientation change efforts should be viewed as voluntary, in light of the complex dynamics of the values and expectations on sexual orientation within the heteronormative faith communities (Linjakumpu, 2015, p. 128–134).

This study explores the identity negotiations of Finnish same sex attracted persons, against the cultural and religious background described in this introduction. In the

following chapters, I will account for the theoretical and methodological standpoints of this study. I will also examine previous research on the same, or closely related topics, after which a description of the methods of analysis and material will follow. Lastly, I will present and discuss my findings.

2 Theoretical and Methodological Standpoints

To understand and analyze aspects of identity, I have chosen a critical discursive approach. In this approach, the focus is on language; how it is used to present ourselves, and to give meaning to who we are. In this chapter, I will go over the central concepts of critical discursive psychology, later on also referred to as "CDP". I will also present the most relevant contributions to the theory, including social constructionism, in which the roots of critical discursive psychology can be found.

2.1 Social Constructionism

Social constructionism challenges the idea of objective truth and objective reality, instead suggesting that reality is under our constant construction, depending on how we approach it and speak about it. Our approach depends on our social relationships and our communities, as well as the outcome of our conversations therein. For example, something could be seen, or rather constructed, as a problem, just as easily as it could be constructed as an opportunity. (Gergen, 2009, p. 2–6.) Within social constructionism a great emphasis is placed on language and its meaning. The meaning of our words is derived from their social context. Our interaction follows patterns and is based on a shared understanding of conventions. These patterns and conventions do not only include words, but also actions, objects, spaces and environments. (Gergen, 2009, p.8–9.)

Burr (2015) explains language as a form of social action, highlighting the practical consequences words have. As examples they mention the reading of a court sentence and a priest pronouncing someone to be husband and wife. (Burr, 2015, p. 10–11.) Elaborating on the power of language, Burr points out the word "homosexual" and the recency of the use of the word as a noun. They state that using the word as a noun instead of as an adjective, creates a representation of a certain kind of person, instead of describing a practice. (Burr, 2015, p. 57–58.) Social constructionism can be characterized as anti-essentialist. This means that the social world and the people in it are seen as ever-changing products of social processes, without determined nature or essence. (Burr, 2015, p. 6.)

Social constructionism does not acknowledge the concept of personality as including specific, innate attributes, other than as part of the discourse of individuality. Rather, the term identity is used. Identity is constructed out of the discourses that are culturally available to us, and each component of our identity is also constructed out of discourse. Naturally, for each identity, or each part of our identity, there is a limited number of discourses to draw from. (Burr, 2015, p. 122–124.)

Burr (2015) states that social constructionism can be looked at on a micro or a macro level, pointing to Foucauldian discourse analysis as one of the most prominent representatives of macro level of constructionism (p. 24). Foucault was quite focused on power dynamics, defining discourse as a battlefield, not a mere reflection (Foucault, 1976/2008, p. 181–182). The idea is that we do not mainly reflect and reproduce discourse; but engage in it as part of societal power play (Foucault, 1976/2008, p. 182). Burr (2015) writes specifically about the discourse on sexuality, stating that we have no choice but to construct our identity out of the representations of sexuality that are culturally available to us (p. 124–125). This offers a powerful example on the connection language and discourse have with power relations as well as identity. If the discourses that are available construct homosexuality as perverse or morally reprehensible, one might struggle to personally construct a positive identity as a gay person, unless one specifically resists the offered identity (Burr, 2015, p. 126–127). Micro social construction includes the concept of personal agency in resisting unfavorable identities, whereas macro social construction sees the person more as an outcome of dominant discursive and societal structures (Burr, 2015, p. 24–28).

To resist unfavorable identities we can draw from other, broader discourses. At the same time, some see the resistance of oppressive identities as pointless, still serving to validate the prevalent discourses. (Burr, 2015, p. 126–129.) In this study the acknowledgement of micro and macro levels of social construction and discourse is highly relevant, as the broader discourses of faith communities, faith traditions, church institutions and society in general, is referred to repeatedly in the interview material, and therefore is in interplay with the micro level of identity discourse. Since societal and religious discourse at times are conflicting, the participants were able to use their

agency in drawing from whichever broader discourse that supported their construction of identity.

2.2 Critical Discursive Psychology

Critical discursive psychology has developed within the social constructionist paradigm. One of the first, comprehensive works that can be related to the development of critical discursive psychology is that by Potter and Wetherell (1987). Although they did not use the terms discursive psychology, or critical discursive psychology, at first, they introduced concepts which in some form can be seen as central within discursive psychology today, such as *interpretative repertoire* (Potter & Wetherell, 1987, p. 146–149). Above all, they emphasized the importance of language within social psychology (Potter & Wetherell, 1987). Potter later listed the basic elements of discursive psychology as *construction*, *action*, and *rhetoric* (1996a, p. 150). *Construction* refers to people constructing versions of reality in their social interactions, such as an account of an event, from a specific perspective. These versions of reality, or constructs, then become their own entities, independent of the speaker. (Potter, 1996a, p. 151–152.) *Action* refers to the idea that people through speaking and writing are preforming actions, which can be studied in the context of discourse to reveal their nature. Examples of such actions are defending one's own point of view; or criticizing another's. (Potter, 1996a, p. 152.) *Rhetoric* refers to the *means* for constructing reality and taking action in discourse. Potter (1996a) highlights the role of conflict in social life, where the constructed versions of reality and the actions they represent, often serve to *rhetorically* undermine alternative constructs (p. 152).

Wetherell (1998) defines critical discursive social psychology as a discipline focused on "the situated flow of discourse", exploring the discursive practices of people constructing and negotiating their mental states, their identities, and events. The focus is both on how these are formulated, and on their social and psychological consequences. CDP also applies complex understanding of historical context in analyzing discursive practices. (Wetherell, 1998.)

Discursive psychologists have found that people who express attitudes or recount memories do much more than just retrieve stored information. In fact,

spoken accounts are highly context-specific and the speakers preform a wide range of social actions through the language they use. CDP attempts to understand this relationship between discourse and its producers. (Edley, 2001, p. 190.) What distinguishes CDP from discursive psychology is the focus on both the immediate social setting of the discourse, as well as the broader context that it is found within (Pettersson & Sakki, in press, 2020). This is something that Pettersson and Sakki (in press, 2020) point to, to motivate the usefulness of CDP for studying political discourse. A similar motivation applies for the use of CDP in this study: the broader discourses of faith communities, faith traditions, and church institutions will be analyzed in terms of how they are reflected within the micro level discourse of the interviewees.

Edley (2001) offers an example of how to approach the concept of identity through CDP. When speaking on gender and identities, they argue that "the jelly never sets" (Edley, 2001, p. 192). This is meant as a metaphor for the fluidity of gender and identities, which do not necessarily "set", but can constantly adapt to various social settings, and are performed differently depending on the context (Edley, 2001, 192). In analysing the discursive reproduction of masculinity, Edley (2001) concludes, that gender identities, as well as other identities, are negotiated, constantly remade, and performed (p. 194–196). This refers to a complex process, where a person engages with various discourses and interpretative repertoires in order to construct, and constantly re-construct their identity. (Edley, 2001, p. 192–196.)

2.3 Positioning Theory

Potter and Wetherell (1987) explain interpretative repertoires as specific ways of speaking and behaving within specific contexts or specific groups. Interpretative repertoires usually employ specific metaphors and figures of speech. (Potter & Wetherell, 1987, p. 146–149.) Such interpretative repertoires exist for example within faith communities, where people use expressions related to scripture and a shared understanding of religious conventions. In such communities one also encounters behaviour which relates to a shared understanding of spiritual values and practices.

Interpretative repertoires sometimes produce what are called ideological dilemmas. Ideologies can be divided into intellectual and cultural ideologies. The cultural ideologies include ideas and sayings that are logically flawed or even contradictory to each other. Interpretative repertoires are part of these cultural ideologies, that from time to time collide with intellectual ideologies. (Billig et al., 1988, p. 25–42.) Edley (2001) uses extracts of conversations from his study on masculinity to explain ideological dilemmas. In some of these extracts, men talk about having both a career and a family. There is talk about how men and women should have equal opportunity to build careers, but also equally share parental responsibilities. This is put to question by pointing out the scenario of neither parent being able to be there for the child, or each other, in the case of them both having a career. (Edley, 2001, p.202-209.) The ideological dilemma emerges out of the conflict between the ideals for career building and the ideals regarding family life and equality.

CDP employs the term positioning for placing oneself within conversation and interpretative repertoires (Edley, 2001, p. 210). Davies and Harré (1990) initially wrote about positioning as a way to escape the limitations of using the term "role", which was deemed too static. Subject positions are more situation-specific, and more frequently negotiated (Davies & Harré, 1990; Harré & Slocum, 2003).

Claiming a position within conversation can equal claiming a certain identity. However, these positions and identities can easily be changed, even within the same conversation. Edley (2001) also mentions being positioned by someone else, or by a prevalent discourse, at least initially. We then have the options of renegotiating this position, as "masters of language". (Edley, 2001, p. 210.) Within the interview material gathered in this study, subject positions are constantly found to be claimed, assigned, negotiated, and renegotiated, showing a constant display of the relationship between discourse and its producers.

2.4 Constructing Positions Rhetorically

As previously mentioned, Potter (1996a) lists rhetoric as a third basic element of discursive psychology. In addition to acknowledging that people construct interpretative repertoires and subject positions in their social practices, through the examination of rhetoric, we can also focus on *how* they do this. Edwards et al. (1995) refer to

arguments and other rhetorical constructs as devices, or even rhetorical ploys (Edwards et al., 1995). However, while the premise is that people actively employ rhetorical devices to construct their positions, this does not necessarily suggest that the use of rhetoric is calculating. Potter (1996b) finds it plausible, that people over time develop intricate rhetorical skills, which they employ without even being aware of what they are doing, or without having planned their rhetorical actions beforehand (p. 65).

I will examine the construction of interpretative repertoires and subject positions by identifying various rhetorical devices employed by the participants of this study. Below I have explained the most common rhetorical devices that I have identified in the interview material and referred to in my analysis.

Extreme case formulation

Some examples of extreme case formulations given by Pomeranz (1986) are "completely innocent", and "every time". By using this type of expressions, the speaker attempts to justify, to defend, to shift blame or responsibility, to discern, to accuse, etc. In the material of this study, extreme case formulation was found to be employed mainly as a means of highlighting one's experiences and justifying one's opinions.

Reported speech

Vološinov (1929/1973) defines reported speech as "an utterance belonging to someone else" (p. 116). It is speech that has existed outside of the delivery in which it is being included in the moment, something that is being referred to by another speaker. Reported speech is inadvertently somewhat altered from its original form, as it is delivered in a different context, by a different person. (Vološinov, 1929/1973, p. 116). Vološinov (1929/1973) connects reported speech to the use of rhetoric, pointing out that an utterance with an air of hierarchical eminence is less likely to be contested (p. 123). Buttny (1998) characterizes reported speech as something reflecting both the original and present speaker, and also as a means of appropriating the reported speech for the present speaker's purposes. They further discuss the use of reported speech as a way of actively framing and contextualizing one's own statements. (Buttny, 1998). In this study reported speech was found mainly to be used to highlight and provide credibility for the interviewees' own experiences.

Category entitlement

Potter et al. (1993) discuss the use of categorizations in conversation. They point out that certain category memberships are linked to certain knowledge, using the example of doctors, who would be generally expected to have knowledge about illnesses. Bringing up category membership in a conversation can therefore be used with intention, as a rhetorical device, to affect the weight of one's words, something which is called category entitlement. (Potter et al., 1993.) In the context of this study category entitlement was mainly employed by referring to membership in one's own faith community, to establish authority while speaking on matters relating to the faith community in question.

Narrative organization

Potter (1996b) states that a person may organize a narrative by structuring the order of events, the characters, and the level of detail of the said narrative. This organization can be a strategy for enhancing the credibility of their account. (Potter, 1996b, p. 118).

Footing

Goffman (1979) describes footing as the way a person aligns or projects themselves in conversation. Apart from choice of words, footing can be marked by speaking in a specific tone or pitch, or by one's posture. Changes in footing is framed as a way of managing the way we express something and managing how it is received. One of the examples Goffman (1979) gives for changing footing is a pediatrician at a training facility addressing both a young patient and their mother as well as medical students in quite different ways as part of the same stream of communication. Obviously, medical procedures would need to be explained in a different manner to a child as opposed to their mother, not to mention to medical students. However, reasons and motives for footing, and changes in footing, vary. In this study, the participants' employment of footing was closely linked to claiming desired subject positions or avoiding undesired subject positions.

Laughing

Billig (2001) writes about humor and laughing as a way of dealing with shame and embarrassment over past events. The premise is that a person laughing while speaking about something that previously happened does not necessarily mean that this event was funny when it first occurred. Billig (2001) describes this humorous recounting of a previous awkward event as a type of revenge against the negative experience and the shame one might have felt during that time, something one might take pleasure in. The participants of this study related many painful experiences, describing feelings of shame and embarrassment, often accompanied by laughter, which makes this rhetorical device highly relevant for the analysis of the interview material. Applying Billig's (2001) idea, laughing at previous events can be seen as a way for the interviewees to alleviate the embarrassment they might have experienced during the events they were recounting, to distance themselves from a socially uncomfortable experience, and also to distance themselves from subject positions related to shame.

3 Previous Research

Previous research on LGBTIQ+ or same sex attracted persons within Christian communities include a connection to wellbeing, the issue of stigma, identity conflicts, and ways of coping with, or resolving challenges related to these aforementioned issues. The results of previous studies vary, and do not provide information that can be unambiguously generalized across different cultures and subgroups. There is more quantitative than qualitative research on the topic, and the latter is fragmented, focusing on smaller subgroups within the phenomenon. (Gibbs, 2015; Rodriguez, 2009; Yip, 2002.) This study focuses on members of Finnish Christian communities, but since there is not much Finnish research on the topic, I have chosen to also reference studies from culturally more similar societies such as the UK, the USA, and Australia, still acknowledging that all countries have their distinctive cultural features, also with regards to faith traditions and sexual orientation.

3.1 Same Sex Attraction and Wellbeing in Christian Faith Communities

Hillier, Mitchell, and Mulcare (2008) studied same sex attracted youth and the negotiation of religious discourse, using data from a national survey on the sexuality, health and wellbeing of 14-21-year old same sex attracted young Australians, which was conducted three years prior by Hillier, Turner, and Mitchell (2005). The survey had open ended questions where respondents could submit autobiographical stories. While there had been no questions regarding faith in the survey, a significant number still mentioned Christian discourse in their responses. While the respondents who included religious discourse on the topic of sexuality sometimes reported affirming experiences from a faith community or spiritual leader, they more often positioned themselves negatively, in a way that divided them from their family, their community, and themselves. Hillier et al. (2008) confirmed previous findings of a connection of this type of positioning to higher rates of self-harm, drug-use, depression and suicide. The researchers expressed concern for the wellbeing of same sex attracted Christian youth in Australia, stating that they are in a vulnerable position as they are only starting to make sense of their emerging sexual feelings, while being in a culturally Christian context where positive discourses affirming homosexuality are harder to access. (Hillier et al., 2008.)

Gibbs (2015) conducted a quantitative study on sexual identity and wellbeing among non-heterosexual youth in the US, using the term "LGBT identity". They found that identity conflict emerging from dissonance felt between religious beliefs and LGBT identity was associated with higher risk of suicide. Another finding was a strong connection between parental anti-homosexual beliefs and suicidal thoughts, even with young adults that had already moved out of their childhood home. Regardless of the results of his own study, Gibbs (2015) points out that quantitative studies of the relationship between religiosity and non-heterosexual orientation have produced varying results. The varying and partly indefinite results of quantitative studies might explain the emergence of qualitative studies to better understand the complex relation between sexual orientation, faith community, and wellbeing (Gibbs, 2015).

Yip (2007) has studied sexual orientation discrimination in both Christian and Islamic religious communities. They point out that the definition of sexual orientation discrimination followed in the research project most likely differs from the idea the participants themselves have of sexual orientation discrimination. This is because negative positions on homosexuality within religious communities are often seen as divinely mandated, and not as intentional unfair treatment. Also, there is sometimes a discrepancy between the official position of a faith tradition, and the lived experiences of individual church members in specific communities. The research project that focused on Christians involved 565 British participants, both men and women, who identified as either bi- or homosexual. Yip concluded that discrimination had a negative impact on the research participants' wellbeing and social integration, as they reported experiences of depression and helplessness, harmful treatment aimed at changing their sexual orientation, as well as social stigmatization. (Yip, 2007.)

3.2 The Issue of Stigma; Sexual Orientation Change Efforts vs. Reconciling Non-heterosexual Orientation with a Christian Faith

Goffman (1963) has written elaborately on stigma, defining it as an attribute, which socially discredits a person or a group, causing them shame and rejection. As shown by previous research, the challenges of reconciling non-heterosexual orientation with a Christian faith lead many to experience stigmatization and exclusion, and to struggle with their wellbeing. However, many of these people still choose to remain Christian,

and to remain affiliated with a faith community. Some same sex attracted persons try to find a solution to this predicament by opting for sexual orientation change efforts. The American Psychological Association (2009) reports varying results in current research on the effects of sexual orientation change efforts. While it can be concluded that most people are unsuccessful in changing their sexual orientation, some still report positive experiences of engaging in treatments with this aim (American Psychological Association, 2009). Ex-gay ministries use the stories of those who report a successful change of sexual orientation to encourage other same sex attracted Christians to follow their example (Creek, 2014, p. 137). In a 2013 position statement, the American Psychiatric Association warned against subjecting anyone to sexual orientation efforts, referring to significant risk of harm (American Psychiatric Association, 2020). While completely conclusive and unambiguous research on the harmful effects of treatments aimed at changing sexual orientation does not exist, these treatments have also not been scientifically validated (American Psychiatric Association, 2020). The American Psychiatric Association (2020) also recognizes that the scientific understanding of sexual orientation change efforts might be distorted because of societal stigma.

Thumma (1991) has written about a study conducted in 1984 and 1985 on members of the parachurch Evangelical organization called Good News. Good News offered a way for conservative, American Evangelicals to reconcile their same sex attraction with their Christian faith, something that had not seemed possible to them. The organization held group meetings in five different cities, but also corresponded with over 1300 people in its nine years of operation. Material for the study was collected through participant observation of 20 group meetings, in-depth personal interviews with seven members of Good News, as well as studying the aforementioned correspondence, all issues of the organization's newsletter, and the group's published literature. The participants of Good News followed a program, where they were taught to reframe their theological approach to the issue of homosexuality and renegotiate their identity, after which they were expected to actively share this theology and their personal testimonies with the gay community as well as the churches with predominantly heterosexual members. Before entering this program, many had reported a pressing need to resolve what in the study was referred to as an *identity-conflict*, and also reported great distress concerning their sexuality in relation to their religious identity. After taking part in the program, most participants reported success in integrating their homosexuality into their religious

identity. However, Thumma found that most did not commit to the other objectives of Good News; but left the organization after personally reconciling their sexuality with their religious identity, which might explain the dissolution of the organization in 1987. (Thumma, 1991.)

Yip (1997) conducted a study on the re-negotiation of sexual and religious identity from the perspective of stigma-management. They surveyed and then interviewed 60 gay, male Christians in the UK, who had already reconciled their sexuality with their faith. Yip found that the participants deployed mainly four strategies for reconciling their sexuality with their faith: "(i) Attacking the Stigma; (ii) Attacking the Stigmatizer; (iii) Using Positive Personal Experience; and (iv) Using the Ontogeneric Argument." (Yip, 1997). Attacking the stigma was achieved by redefining one's theological understanding in a way which did not condemn homosexuality. Attacking the stigmatizer meant dismissing the authority of the church in passing moral judgment on homosexuality. The positive personal experiences revolved around the respondents having lived out a homosexual identity and feeling that they had been able to maintain Christian values in their lives as well as in their relationships with same-sex partners. The ontogeneric argument presented a view of homosexuality as part of God's creation and plan, therefore not seen as something to be changed. (Yip, 1997.)

Yip and Gross (2010) have studied the religious orientation, beliefs and practices of French and British Christians. They point out that within the discourse on homosexuality and the church, especially regarding discrimination, what is missing is the experiences and voices of gay Christians themselves. Yip and Gross (2010) explore the reasons of non-heterosexual persons for staying within a church, which might by others be characterized as a homophobic institution. They found these reasons to be related to a commitment to integrate sexuality and spirituality, and to working towards greater inclusivity within the church. These reasons were supported by seeing Jesus as a champion of social justice, their own personal positive experiences, assigning only marginal moral authority to the church, as well as increasing theological, social and political capital. (Yip & Gross, 2010.)

Research suggests that a person identifying as LGBTIQ+, or experiencing same sex attraction, experiences distress when being part of a family or community which relates

negatively to non-heterosexual identity, and that those affiliated with affirming communities do better (Rodriguez, 2009). However, some studies point to an increasing trend in European Christian culture, where people, when so inclined, tend to go against the consensus of the church institution. Yip (2002) has, in the British context, written about the persistence of faith among non-heterosexual Christians. They attribute this to a greater empowerment of the individual to disagree with religious institutions and their positions on sexual orientation, which allows for a greater freedom to identify as for example both gay and Christian, regardless of most Christian churches still opposing same sex marriage. This is in line with Yip's findings in the 1997 study quoted above, on stigma-management amongst gay Christian men (Yip, 1997). Yip states that one should acknowledge differences in geographic context, bringing up the example of the decline of institutional Christianity in Europe. The factors contributing to this phenomenon might not be able to explain the situation in, for example, the United States. (Yip, 2002.)

An increase in freedom of religious interpretation cannot be expected to completely eliminate the challenges facing sexual minorities in churches. However, it does provide an interesting and different perspective on sexual and religious identity positioning of same sex attracted persons within Christian communities. In this study, the aim is to see what types of positioning occurs amongst the participants, who have a background in heteronormative Christian communities in Finland.

3.3 The Finnish Context, Positioning of the Study

There is not a lot of research on same sex attracted persons within Christian faith communities in Finland, and the research that does exist is somewhat fragmented. Most of it is conducted within the fields of theology and gender or queer studies, some within political science, and often studies are limited to concern specific denominations. Especially within theology, there seems to be a focus on the views and teaching of churches and the attitudes and work of its clergy (Hytönen, 2017; Kejonen, 2014; Saarelma, 2009). There is not much focus on personal experiences and meaning-making, applying a discursive approach. There are, however, some exceptions to this rule.

Eetu Kejonen and Teemu Ratinen (2017) analyzed autobiographical letters sent in by 9 members of the Conservative Laestadian movement, which is the biggest revivalist movement within the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland, and strictly heteronormative. The respondents all identified as gay, and their letters included reflections on shame, fear, disgust, and family ties. Kejonen and Ratinen (2017) focused on affect and emotions related to homosexuality within Conservative Laestadianism. In their analysis, they were interested in the construction of sexual subjectivity on an individual level and on the level of social relationships within the community. A theme emerging in all letters was the conflicting relationship between faith and sexual orientation, and reflections on how to reconcile this conflict. The researchers discerned ongoing negotiations of the conditions of being accepted as a gay person within the faith tradition. (Kejonen & Ratinen, 2017.)

Teemu Ratinen has in their doctoral thesis in as well as in their related book in analyzed 71 letters by Finnish Christians with accounts of shame related to sexuality, in light of their religious convictions (Ratinen, 2014, 2015). Using the same material, Ratinen first focused specifically on the interplay between sexually prompted shame and religious conviction (2014), and then on the historical changes in sexuality and faith (2015). While Ratinen mainly directs their academic contribution to the field of theology (2015, p. 7), they offer relevant reflections on sexual identity, which surely transcend the boundaries of various academic disciplines. Some of the letters in Ratinen's research material reflected on the heteronormative norms and expectations within the writer's faith tradition. Some writers shared that they had dated or married persons of the opposite sex, regardless of not being sexually attracted to them, prompted by these expectations. Many expressed feelings of shame regarding their sexuality, and it often took them a long time to acknowledge a non-heterosexual orientation, something they in part related to the stigma accompanying the words *gay* or *lesbian*. The writers also expressed personal religious conviction as a hinderance for embracing a non-heterosexual orientation. Affirming approaches on homosexuality was mainly experienced outside the writers' faith traditions, or emerged as a result or their own, personal theological reflections. (Ratinen, 2015, p. 173–208.) Since the letters were written by persons in different age groups, with some similarities between accounts of persons within the same age groups, Ratinen states that sexuality clearly is something

that is shaped by the surrounding culture and society, and history (Ratinen, 2015, p. 209).

The book “Saanko olla totta?” (Tuovinen et al., 2011) was published with the intent of educating Finnish social- and healthcare professionals, teachers, and clergy, on how to appropriately approach and work with LGBTIQ+ persons. It contained a few individual accounts of LGBTIQ+ persons’ attempts on changing their sexual orientation or gender identity, some accounts dating back decades, however these accounts were not interpreted in any academic manner (Tuovinen et al., 2011).

There are no comprehensive studies nor statistics speaking to the wellbeing or experiences of discrimination of specifically same sex attracted or non-heterosexual persons in Finland. Although it is worth mentioning that the biannual School Health Promotion Study of the National Institute for Health and Welfare in Finland [THL], included direct questions regarding sexual orientation and gender identification, as well as experiences of sexual harassment and abuse, for the first time in its 2019 survey, directed at students in high schools, senior high schools, and vocational schools ([THL], 2020). The results of the survey indicated that those who did not identify as cisgender or heterosexual experienced significantly more bullying in school, more sexual harassment, as well as more emotional and physical abuse from parents or caregivers, something which gained significant public attention when the results of the survey were published (Terävä, 2019).

“From Burden to Resource” is a project financed by the Finnish Ministry of Social Affairs and Health, with the aim of improving the wellbeing of LGBTIQ+ persons in spiritual and religious communities (From Burden to Resource, n.d.). As part of this project, three different surveys have been conducted online in the recent years. The most recent survey focused on the attitudes of Finnish church workers towards gender and sexual minorities (Taakasta voimavaraksi, 2020, February 8, February 28, April 2). Last year a survey was conducted on experiences of LGBTIQ+ persons visiting the Family Counselling Centres of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland (Taakasta voimavaraksi, 2019, September 19, September 26).

In 2018 “From Burden to Resource” collected survey-data on the experiences of reparative therapy. The survey had 73 respondents. While some expressed at least partly

positive experiences with reparative therapy, the majority expressed having negative experiences, some feeling like it almost ruined their lives. The survey revealed that reparative therapy was sometimes offered by Finnish medical professionals or professional counselors. The employees of the project "From Burden to Resource" contacted Valvira, which is the National Supervisory Authority for Welfare and Health in Finland. Valvira stated, that they do not specifically forbid reparative therapy, although they do not consider it a normal, or appropriate treatment for professionals to offer. (Taakasta voimavaraksi, 2018, September 21, October 5, November 1, November 13, November 26.)

The results of the 2018 survey (Taakasta voimavaraksi, 2018, September 21, October 5, November 1, November 13, November 26) provided some insight into how strong the heteronormative expectation is within many Finnish Christian communities even today. However, the project only provided descriptive information of the respondents' survey answers, and therefore sheds no light on the meaning-making behind them. The aim of the present study is to provide such insights, by applying a qualitative, critical discursive approach to same sex attracted persons' identity negotiations within Finnish Christian communities.

3.4 Research Question and the Aim of the Study

For this master's thesis, I wanted to study the challenges facing those who struggle to fit into the more conservative, Christian faith communities. There were many topics to choose from, such as women in leadership, divorcees and remarriage, purity culture, and norms relating to gender and sexual minorities. Sexual minorities seemed to present a clearly defined group for this topic, and knowing my own networks and affiliations, I believed I would be able to find participants for such a study. Since the initial idea was to focus on norms and fitting in, I focused on the issue of identity. I chose a discursive approach, as I was interested in how individuals draw upon socially and culturally shared meanings when constructing potentially conflicting identities in their talk.

The applied theoretical approach clearly describes identity as a discursive phenomenon; something to be constructed, negotiated, and performed in social interaction. Applying this approach, I have formulated the research question for this study as follows:

How persons experiencing same sex attraction negotiate their identities within, or against heteronormative Christian faith communities.

Discerning claimed identities and subject positions relevant to the topic, this study focuses on interpretative repertoires specifically in relation to sexual orientation, faith, and religious community.

The aim of the study is to increase understanding towards same sex attracted persons with backgrounds in heteronormative Christian faith communities, both within and outside these communities. Possibly, a greater understanding of this group of people and their experiences could make it easier for them to not be left on their own to process all the implications of a non-heterosexual orientation within their faith tradition. The academic contribution I hope to make with this study in the Finnish context, is providing a discursive, social psychological approach to the topic, focusing on the how same sex attracted persons themselves account for their experiences within heteronormative Christian faith communities.

4 Material and Methods

To study the research question, I chose to do a semi-structured, thematic interview with open-ended questions. Since the topic can be described to be of a sensitive nature, with traumatic experiences potentially woven into the participants' background, the aim was to allow for a greater freedom and autonomy while discussing the issues, so as to not pressure research subjects into specific type of answers, or to risk over-simplifying their experiences. While a survey could have provided a greater assurance of anonymity, it would not have allowed for direct follow-up questions, which proved useful for discerning and clarifying various opinions and experiences within these complex issues, as well as gently prompting the participants to expand on their answers.

The interview included questions on the participants' age, gender, sexual orientation and church affiliation. More detailed questions were asked on the type of church they attended, on the type of teaching and attitude they had encountered regarding same sex attraction and relationships, on their own theological and moral approach to non-heterosexual orientation, and on whether or not they had been open about their sexual orientation and why. The interview also included questions on how the participants experienced their sexual orientation in relation to their faith community versus other social contexts, and if they ever sought help or support for issues specifically regarding their sexual orientation. An outline to the interview can be found in the appendix. It is worth mentioning that the outline mainly functioned as a checklist, so as to remember to touch on all the topics with each participant. The order in which the topics were discussed varied greatly, since I did not want to interrupt the participants' from going off on relevant tangents.

I consider it important to give a more detailed explanation of my choice of questions for the interview, so as to clarify their function. While there were already some prerequisites for being chosen as a participant of this study, I could hardly make assumptions on the participants' self-categorization, self-identification, orientation, or faith at the time of the interview, which is why I included questions regarding gender, sexual orientation, and religious conviction. Although this study did not focus on gender specifically, I still deemed including the concept relevant, as the heteronormative discourse very much stems from a binary understanding of gender. Asking more

specifically about church denomination helped me to understand a bit more about the participants' background and how to focus various questions, regardless of denomination not being disclosed as I present my findings. To elaborate, there are for example quite different consequences of being openly gay within the different church denominations, in some you can even expect to be excommunicated for being in a romantic relationship with a person of the same sex. By asking about the participants' views on how to be a good Christian and relating that to church teaching and personal convictions as well as experiences of same sex attraction, my aim was to facilitate identity negotiations relevant to the theme of this study. Differentiating between experiences in the church context and other social setting was intended to define the identity negotiations specific to the church context. Asking whether or not the participants ever asked for help in dealing with their same sex attraction, I hoped to produce more information on how the participants constructed, framed and negotiated their sexual orientation in speech, through them accounting for how they had spoken about this issue with others.

I applied a critical discursive approach to the analysis of the material. Specifically, the aim was to identify relevant interpretative repertoires and assumed subject positions. As in discursive research, I also focused on *how* the repertoires and positions were constructed, by identifying rhetorical devices used by the participants, such as extreme case formulation, reported speech, category entitlement, narrative organization, footing, and laughing.

4.1 Collection of the Material

This study set out to include individuals over the age of 18, who were, or had been members of a registered, Christian church in Finland, or a smaller, Evangelical free church, that is not registered as a church but as an organization. The prerequisite was that participants had experienced same sex attraction; and were or had been affiliated with Christian faith communities where only heterosexual relationships were condoned, and marriage was seen as an institution strictly between two people of the opposite sex. Participants needed to be willing to discuss their views on the relation between sexual orientation, religious conviction and affiliation with Christian community. This was all something that was explained to each of the participants during an assessment phone call prior to the actual interview. During this phone call the participants were also told

more specifically about my own, personal background in Evangelical free churches, the ethical guidelines of the study and the ways in which their anonymity would be ensured.

In February 2019, I approached Journey Finland, and in March 2019, I approached Rainbow Association Malkus and the employees responsible for their project "From Burden to Resource" to ask for help in finding appropriate participants for this study. The purpose of Rainbow Association Malkus is to improve the wellbeing of LGBTIQ+ persons in various spiritual and religious communities (Rainbow Association Malkus, n.d.). Journey Finland is a Christian organization that offers help and healing in emotional, relational and sexual issues, specifically from a Christian standpoint (Journey Finland, 2013). Both of these deal with same sex attracted, or LGBTIQ+ persons who have affiliations with Christian communities, and who might struggle to reconcile their sexual orientation with their faith.

I conducted seven interviews between July and October 2019, in different parts of Finland, either in my own home or the homes of the participants, with just one exception where the interview took place at a hotel. Three of the participants were referred via past or present board members of Journey Finland, and four via the project employees of "Burden to resource", or an emailing list to which the project employees reached out to on my behalf.

4.2 Description of the Material

In total I conducted and recorded seven interviews. Their length varied between 74 and 113 minutes, creating altogether 10 hours and 43 minutes of interview material. The interviews were conducted in Finnish and Swedish and have been transcribed verbatim. Any quotes displayed in the analysis have been translated into English.

Three of the interviewees identified as cis women, and four as cis men. Their ages ranged from 25 to 68 years. All were professing Christians, coming from different parts of Finland, with backgrounds in varying church denominations. All reported experiences of same sex attraction. Three were married to a person of the opposite sex, these were the interviewees that primarily viewed same sex attraction as something to overcome; and had all three engaged in sexual orientation change efforts. The four other interviewees currently held more affirming views on homosexuality. Two of them had

previously been married to a person of the opposite sex; but were now divorced. One of these two had, unsuccessfully, engaged in reparative therapy for many years. Both of these two who were previously married, stated their sexual orientation as a reason for divorce. Another interviewee was married to a person of the same sex, it was their first marriage. All interviewees were currently or had previously been active members of heteronormative Christian faith communities. Three of the four interviewees whom now held more affirming views towards a non-heterosexual orientation had left their previous church after embracing a homosexual orientation, and one of these had completely stopped going to church for the time being.

4.3 Ethical Considerations

When formulating the interview questions and conducting the interviews, as well as when analyzing the material, I tried to be mindful of my own background and its effects on my preconceived notions and attitudes towards the research topic. I have myself been affiliated with different Evangelical free churches in Finland and have an Advanced Certificate in Biblical Leadership from Vineyard Institute, which trains and equips church leaders especially within the Vineyard Movement, which has churches around the world, also in Finland. Vineyard Churches in Finland can be categorized as an Evangelical free church. I am thus familiar with the overwhelmingly heteronormative approach to sexual orientation and marriage within the Evangelical free churches in Finland. My understanding is that the majority of the leaders and counselors affiliated with Evangelical free churches in Finland, generally relate to other than heterosexual orientation as something to suppress or to be healed from, when offering prayer ministry or counseling. This has led me to see non-heterosexual orientation as problematic within these Christian communities. However, my perception is that issues of sexuality are often over-simplified both within and outside faith communities, although in different ways. On the one hand, faith communities might see non-heterosexual orientation as something that can simply be prayed away or healed; or suggest celibacy as a means to not living a sinful life. On the other hand, people outside faith communities might suggest simply leaving the community or even one's faith behind, in order to be free from this conflict. I do not believe that either of these approaches fully acknowledge the complexity of sexual orientation or religious conviction, or the need for belonging and acceptance in relation to both. While this might fully well be the case, I have tried not to let this understanding of the topic become over-powering in how I have framed the study or interpreted the findings.

I was very open with all the participants about my own background within the Evangelical faith tradition, all the while trying to make clear that my approach to the research topic, to them, or to their sexual orientation, was not meant to be normative. I mentioned that I was interviewing persons with varying approaches to their own sexual orientation, and that I wanted to remain equally respectful to everyone. I was also transparent about the fact that I myself do not have personal experiences of challenges with reconciling my sexual orientation with my faith. Of course, I cannot know exactly

how this information of my background was received by the participants, and how it potentially directed their answers.

The study followed the ethical principles issued by the Finnish National Board of Research Integrity in 2009 as well as the ones issued in 2019 (Finnish National Board on Research Integrity, 2019). Participation in the study was voluntary, and while dealing with issues of a personal, sensitive nature, there was an emphasis on the protection of the privacy of the participants. Attention was given to potentially personal, detailed accounts, which could compromise anonymity, regardless of the absence of personal information such as name, place of residence or church membership. Since some churches only have a small number of members, the exact church affiliation of the research subjects is not disclosed, just an overall description of the type of churches in question.

Composing the interview, I paid attention to the wording of the questions, in order to avoid normative language and phrasing, so as to not make false assumptions of the interviewees' experiences, or to direct their answers too much. While conducting the interviews, I did my best to make sure the participants had a positive experience of the situation, communicating interest, openness, and at times compassion, when deemed appropriate. In cases of the participants sharing very personal, and even traumatic experiences, I focused on avoiding potential further traumatization by constantly making sure the sharing was voluntary, and by communicating acceptance and compassion. Detailed accounts of deep, personal trauma were excluded from the analysis.

When selecting participants for the study, the candidates were asked a few questions relating to their mental wellbeing. Those whom indicated running a risk of experiencing emotional harm when sharing their experiences outside a therapeutic environment were not included in the study. A short debriefing was offered after the interview, where participants could give feedback on the interview experience.

After the interviews, according to the agreement made with the participants, I called or messaged each of them every few months to see if they all still felt good about the interviews they gave, and if they still affirmed the permission that they had given me for

using the interviews for this study. During one of these phone calls one of the participants told me that they had been diagnosed with a mental illness, and that they had been unwell during their interview. At the time of the phone call in question, and the following phone call, they were reportedly receiving care and doing better. They maintained that they still stood by what they said in their interview, and they did not oppose the use of their interview in this study, so it did not raise sufficient ethical concerns to remove their interview from the research material. All direct quotations from the interviews have been checked with the participants in question to make sure that they do not contain any information compromising their anonymity, or their dignity.

5 Findings

I have first and foremost attempted to identify interpretative repertoires and claimed subject positions within the conducted interviews relating to my research question: *How persons experiencing same sex attraction negotiate their identities within, or against heteronormative Christian faith communities.* Going through the interview material, I found that the participants mainly constructed interpretative repertoires regarding homosexuality, or same sex attraction. It could be argued that there also were repertoires of heteronormativity and cis-gender normativity. However, these were most often pitted against non-heterosexual orientation and relationships, which is why I deemed it acceptable to discern them as part of a larger discourse, within or against which the participants constructed the repertoires regarding homosexuality. While the term "homosexuality" is not interchangeable with the term "same sex attraction", I still chose to use only the term "homosexuality" when naming the repertoires, to maintain consistency. The subtleties relating to the differences between these two terms will be discussed separately for each interpretative repertoire, whenever a distinction needs to be made.

I have identified four different interpretative repertoires of homosexuality, while acknowledging that they somewhat overlap. These will be elaborated on presently. The participants claimed different subject positions within these repertoires, using various rhetorical devices. Ideological dilemmas emerged when the interviewees attempted to reconcile conflicting expectations, values and positions. Within this chapter I will focus on describing the interpretative repertoires, claimed subject positions, rhetorical devices and ideological dilemmas, without reiterating the definitions of these concepts, something which was already achieved while accounting for my theoretical and methodological standpoints.

As previously mentioned**,** the interviews were conducted in Finnish and in Swedish. As I am fluent in both of these languages, as well as in English, I have myself translated the quotes that are presented in the findings from Finnish or Swedish into English. The words of the interviewees are in cursive. My own words are in cursive and bold. To distinguish which quotes are from the same interviews, I have numbered the interviews, and identified within a parenthesis which interview is in question before each quote. I

have chosen between one and three quotes from each interview, except from interview 7, which is represented in all four interpretative repertoires. This is a conscious choice, as it depicts how much one single narrative can develop, something also seen in other interviews. The main reason for choosing more quotes from interview 7 specifically is because, as it was the last interview I conducted, I had learned how to best advise the interviewee to leave out phrasing in their responses compromising their anonymity, so that I would not have to omit so much of the interview material. Some of the quotes I have chosen are a bit lengthy, however I chose not to shorten them further, as important meanings would then have been left out, which would have made it difficult to map out the findings.

5.1 Interpretative Repertoires

I have named the four interpretative repertoires regarding homosexuality as follows: "Homosexuality as a sin", "Fixing homosexuality?", "Homosexuality as a conduit of social stigma and exclusion", and "Affirmation of homosexuality". The interpretative repertoires and related subject positions are shown in Table 1 on the following page. This table is meant to provide clarity to the findings, while recognizing that the interpretative repertoires and subject positions are somewhat intertwined and not separated neatly. The names of the subject positions will be written in cursive throughout the text.

5.1.1 Homosexuality as a sin

Within this interpretative repertoire, homosexuality is constructed as sinful, which generally entails an understanding of it being morally reprehensive, detrimental, something one might be punished for, and even go to hell for. This is motivated by theological standpoints as well as less defined trains of thought. The theological standpoints are often linked to specific Bible passages or teachings. At times interviewees could not quite point out why they were convicted of the sinfulness of homosexuality, referring to thoughts they "simply developed", or to an obscure, yet indisputable corporate understanding of sexual norms within their faith community or faith tradition. Embracing homosexuality was seen to be connected to harmful

Table 1

Interpretative repertoires about homosexuality and their related subject positions

Subject positions	**Interpretative repertoires**			
	Homosexuality as a sin	Fixing homosexuality?	Homosexuality as a conduit of social stigma and exclusion	Affirmation of homosexuality
Sinful	X			
Faithless	X	X		
Hell bound	X	X		
Someone to be punished	X			
A threat to others	X			
Saved	X			
Accepted	X	X	X	X
On the road to transformation		X		
Already transformed		X		
Avoiding responsibility		X		
Struggling to find a church home			X	X
Stigmatized outsider			X	X
Ashamed			X	
Equal				X
Unequal				X

consequences such as losing one's faith, losing one's salvation, being punished, or going to hell.

The main ideological dilemma within this repertoire is the difficulty in morally reconciling a homosexual orientation with one's faith, something which greatly affected the claimed subject positions. The positions that were claimed within this repertoire was *saved, hell bound, faithless, sinful, accepted, someone to be punished,* and *someone who poses a threat to others*. These will be elaborated on when analyzing chosen quotes from the interviews.

A female interviewee linked the prospect of dating other women to giving up her faith and losing her salvation in the following way (Interview 6):

> *I think it was like at the end of senior high school (Finnish "lukio") when I like, might have already at some point thought that, that like, there are like two directions in which I could go, and it could also be seen as like a spiritual issue at that point that either I give up my faith, or then I go on and like, like I sort of didn't even see an option of them really coexisting.*
> ***So they were to very extreme choices, then?***
> *Yes, so it meant like that if I had like, started acting upon that side of my sexuality, then it would have also meant giving up my faith.*
> […]
> *I think my theology in these issues is like quite, quite the same, but like on the other hand like my image of God has changed in recent years so I perhaps, mm, I like don't necessarily think that a person who lives in this type of relationship won't get into Heaven, so in that sense it's a bit… a bit opened up but regardless I don't like, ever, or like I don't think that it, it wouldn't be for me, like, or that (laughs)… like on my part I do still feel that it's a sin.*
> […]
> ***So, you feel like you grew up with the sense of this being even a question of salvation?***
> *Yes, yes.*
> ***How would that have been categorized for you? Were you told..?***
> *Well, the Bible, from certain passages in the Bible, where it's like linked to salvation, exactly this kind of like, for example, umm, sexual sins, umm, like they don't inherit the kingdom of God, these kinds of passages.*

Here homosexuality is seen as a sexual sin, which potentially leads to the loss of salvation; the loss of one's place in God's eternal kingdom. This understanding is

derived from specific Bible passages. The positioning here would simply be either *saved*, or *faithless* and *hell bound*, depending on whether or not one chooses to embrace a non-heterosexual orientation. The interviewee describes a slight change in her approach to homosexuality over time. At first, she connects homosexuality to a loss of salvation, but later on, she had changed her understanding of the implications of dating other women. She still maintained its sinfulness, positioning those embracing a non-heterosexual orientation as *sinful*, or at least herself as such, due to her own theological understanding of the matter, but no longer saw losing one's salvation as an absolute consequence.

The ideological dilemma of morally reconciling sexual orientation and faith is made clear in the quote above. The interviewee states, that she would according to her previous understanding have needed to completely give up her faith, had she decided to date women. Her choice was then not to pursue romantic relationships with women, something she talks about merely considering, at an earlier stage in life. She makes it clear that by making that choice, she was able to keep her faith, positioning her as *saved*, instead of *sinful* or *hell bound*. Thus, she uses both footing and narrative organization to claim desired subject positions. The only part where she laughs in this quote, is when she speaks about still believing homosexuality is a sin. She stumbles in finding the correct words to express this view, and gives a type of disclaimer, stating that she specifically feels that homosexuality is sinful in her case. This particular comment marks a distance from her previous conviction of a person embracing homosexuality being hell bound, arguably a severe notion. The laughter can therefore be seen as a way of distancing herself from the weight of holding this type of conviction, rather than finding actual humor in it.

In the following quote the interviewee connects unfortunate events to being punished by God for openly being gay, and for choosing to be in a relationship with another woman (Interview 7):

> *So… so like, like they still affect me and for example such a ridiculous thing which reflects my own thinking is that, that at the time of my coming out and publicly starting to date my current wife, I had a kitchen table, where there was sort of a glass sheet on top, so like a glass table. So, I was cleaning and next to the kitchen table there was a glass cabinet, and I was dusting on top of it and didn't realize there was a vase there. And the vase fell on top of the glass table and the*

glass table shattered into a million pieces. And what was my first thought? Well that, that this was punishment for me coming out of the closet and living this sinful life. So, this everyday occurrence was in my mind immediately connected to me coming out a couple of weeks ago.
[…]
(Laughs) yes, yes. So, like I still find myself thinking that… that I will probably get intestinal cancer and die from it that it's pun- like, God is punishing me for this. So it's, it's like a very strong…
Still?
Yes, sometimes still, but nowadays I at least recognize these thoughts so, so it's not necessarily quite, like this stems from something else than from- Like you have to study the Bible to know what God is actually like so it's… it stems from something else. But…
So it's not theology anymore, it's like, something else..?
No, no it- it's sort of like an automated thought process which, which simply sets in.

Multiple positioning and active changes in footing occur within this quote. On the one hand, the interviewee positions herself as *sinful* because of being openly gay and in a relationship with a woman, something God might punish her for. On the other hand, she does not agree with this train of thought, dismissing it as ridiculous, a sort of automated thought pattern, not stemming from her own, current theological convictions. There is a clear discrepancy between her current and previous beliefs, while they still seem to somewhat coexist. Depending on her train of thought, there is a potential ideological dilemma between her faith conviction and her sexual orientation, and the life choices that stem from it. If she follows her initial train of thought, she would position herself as *sinful*, and *someone to be punished*. She uses an extreme case formulation in referring to intestinal cancer, so as to driver home her point of deserving severe punishment. However, she then uses laughing and dismissive language ("such a ridiculous thing") to distance herself from this earlier positioning. She refers to revised beliefs, mentioning a need to revisit the Bible to remind herself of who God is, employing narrative organization and change in footing to claim more desirable subject positions.

While the interviewee employs a lot of rhetorical devices to distance herself from previously claimed, undesirable subject positions, it is not completely successful. She confirms still having something she refers to as an automated thought process, which might prompt her to expect being punished for being gay. This also connects to two

different ways of relating to her faith and to God, where on the one hand she expects to be punished by Him, and on the other hand expects to find a different experience of God when studying the Bible. In both cases she refers to divine authority and faith conviction to motivate her claimed subject positions as either *someone to be punished*, or *accepted*.

The following quote presents an account where the interviewee recalls the teachings of his faith tradition on homosexuality, when in his teenage years (Interview 3):

> ***Okay and here yes, and here it's sort of partly been touched upon, but what I also wanted to ask was like what do you remember about, if you could like mention these like main points in teaching and emphasis in general, but especially relating to sexuality in these churches you've been a part of, if you could give a longer summary on that?***
> *Well a common feature would definitely be a conservative outlook on anything related to sexuality and that there's this strong ideal that we should follow, umm, and everyone agrees that, that like God has created us man and woman, and it's like only these two genders that, that that exist. And in a way also this, it's a bit conflicting I think, but that, that a person actually doesn't become holy until a man finds his woman and a woman finds her man and, and like somehow, the two become one. And like there's, there's something divine almost in a man finding a woman and them being able to procreate and have children. And that everything that differs from this or, or tries to mess with this is, is a sign of us getting closer to the end times and, and I remember it from as early as my confirmation camp, where, where our Lutheran priest said that, that you'll see that we soon will be entering into a time where the homosexuals will have increasing rights and visibility in our society and then it won't be long, long until someone proclaims that Jesus himself was gay because he had so many male disciples. And, and like this was a very strange emphasis like what was that really about… Now, now, after the fact, one thinks, what did this have to do with anything at all, but then, sitting there as a fourteen-year-old, or was I already fifteen, I though oh no, this is something I'm carrying within myself. Like this is something I'm feeling.*
> ***And how did that make you think of yourself?***
> *Well then, back then I thought that I need to be rid of this, or else I'm, I'm a person who carries a, a seed of the end times within me. Like this is not just being condemned myself, but I'll bring judgement over who knows how many others if I don't, if I don't like…*

This interviewee describes a heterosexual relationship as something holy, even divine. Respectively, he likens experiencing same sex attraction with carrying the seed of the end times within himself, using an extreme metaphor for constructing the position of being *a threat to others*, due to being gay. He also formulates these constructs through reported speech, giving an account of what authority figures have said and taught, thus providing these accounts authority. The interviewee expresses having previously internalized these concepts and convictions introduced to him by others; and thus, positioned himself as *sinful*, as "a carrier of the seed of end times", due to feelings of attraction towards persons of the same sex. This presented the same ideological dilemma of reconciling homosexuality with one's faith, as homosexuals were positioned as *sinful*, even *a threat to others* within his faith tradition. The interviewee expresses having had an immediate impulse to distance himself from this position, so as to align with the acceptable, even divine, heterosexual ideal. There is a social dimension to these speech acts, since the interviewee in his reported speech places homosexuals outside of the community of Christians, as bearers of judgement. Identifying as a homosexual would therefore have had grave social consequences, something which is discussed in detail in the third interpretative repertoire. While this desire to rid oneself of same sex attraction is a recurring theme connected to the understanding of homosexuality as a sin, it is particularly prominent in the following repertoire, where it will be discussed further.

Another thing occurring in the quote above, is that the interviewee uses narrative organization to justify the change in his views. He questions the teaching he was exposed to as a teenager, and refers to it as something strange, so as to distance himself from the implications it would have on his current subject position within the church context. He highlights the difference between reflecting on the heteronormative teaching as a 14 or 15-year-old boy, versus now as an adult, inferring that aligning with the teaching was connected to a time where he was not yet capable of questioning it, as opposed to now, already being an adult.

5.1.2 Fixing homosexuality?

Due to the negative framing of homosexuality within heteronormative faith communities, same sex attraction was described by the interviewees as something that one should not, and was expected not to embrace, but rather manage, either by sexual

orientation change efforts or suppression. Within this interpretative repertoire, there is a strong differentiation between experiencing same sex attraction, and "embracing homosexuality", which can be seen as a rhetorical strategy for separating oneself, or Christians as a group, from homosexuality, placing it outside "Christian identity".

Within this interpretative repertoire, same sex attraction is often linked to "brokenness", a general way of describing the effects of traumatic, or otherwise destructive life experiences on a person. The interviewees shared accounts of prayer ministry, or reparative therapy, where focus often would be on finding a connection between specific traumatic life experiences (brokenness), and the emergence of same sex attraction, working under the premise that healing from this specific trauma then would rid a person of homosexual tendencies. All interviewees mentioned either attempting to suppress same sex attraction; or engaging in sexual orientation change efforts, as a part of their religious convictions. However, no one actually reported definite success in changing their sexual orientation, and many in fact related the impossibility of managing to change their sexual orientation, which is why the name of this interpretative repertoire is formulated as a question. This repertoire is constructed with a lot of ambivalence and ideological dilemmas, mainly relating to the challenges in reconciling the unchangeability of one's sexual orientation with the expectations of change stemming from one's religious convictions, something which was also discerned in the first interpretative repertoire.

In line with the previously described interpretative repertoire, homosexuality was also here linked to sin, or sinful behavior, and thereby something to avoid. However, here the focus is on the idea of same sex attraction as symptomatic of something else, something that one can be rid of, and something one should attempt to be rid of. The positioning it therefore allows for is *on the path to transformation,* and *already transformed* the latter representing a rather unattainable ideal. Those unwilling to engage in sexual orientation change efforts are placed in a position of *avoiding responsibility.* There also occurred some similar positioning to what was found in the first repertoire. Depending on one's views and choices regarding sexual orientation change efforts, one could position oneself as *accepted, faithless*, or *hell bound.*

Those interviewees who concluded that a change in their sexual orientation was impossible, initially saw two acceptable options; either choosing a life of celibacy or marrying a person of the opposite sex anyway, as an act of faith. Those who still believed in the possibility of changing their sexual orientation all related to this as an ongoing process, accepting that they might not achieve complete change in this lifetime. They were all married to a person of the opposite sex. These approaches and choices were heavily linked to which subject positions the interviewees claimed, something which will be elaborated on further on.

All three interviewees who were currently married to partners of the opposite sex related experiences of support and counseling they received relating to sexual change efforts, linking homosexuality to brokenness. One of these interviewees gave the following account (Interview 4):

> *Well, I think that perhaps, it's all somehow like connected, that, umm, that like, that if my biggest problem in my opinion is manifested in like homosexual thoughts and desires, then actually all that which, all the brokenness within me and like the unfortunate things that happened in my childhood and such, that is all somehow, umm, like dealing with all of that is also connected to this, this umm, sexual matter. But then, then of course not if we speak directly about, umm, what can cause a person to develop, to develop like hom- more in a homosexual direction or heterosexual direction, it's of course quite, quite clear. In my opinion this is all pretty much connected.*
> […]
> *And you have to like accept, accept the other, the other person regardless of what they think, that they can like come as they are, but then also, umm, it's assumed that a person conforms to the fact that God also changes them according to, to like the likeness of Christ. And then, of course* [*name of interviewee's church*] *interprets, biblically interprets homosexual behavior as a sin, not to be engaged in, but then on the other hand God also accepts a homosexual person completely and, and that in the presence of God, in connection to His church, transformation happens into the likeness of Christ, so like from a homosexual to a heterosexual direction.*

This interviewee links homosexuality to brokenness, by stating that the two are connected. He sees all brokenness, and all the unfortunate events that happened to him manifest in him having homosexual thoughts and desires, which he characterizes as his biggest problem. By making this definition, he paves the way for transformation of his

sexual orientation as a pivotal part of his healing process. He himself claims the subject position of *on the road to transformation*. The interviewee does say that God accepts a homosexual person completely, but still defines homosexuality as a sin if engaged in; and links the Christian goal of transformation into the likeness of Christ with a change in sexual orientation from homosexual to heterosexual. So, on the one hand, another claimed subject position here is *accepted*, since he sees himself as accepted by God, regardless of sexual orientation. On the other hand, while the interviewee presents God's acceptance as unconditional, there still is a condition to this acceptance, in the form of an expectation of transformation. It could be problematic, if a person were to claim a desire to transform into the likeness of Christ, without reporting a change, or a desire to change in their sexual orientation. However, to the interviewee this does not present itself as problematic, or dilemmatic, as he sees himself to be in the process of transformation, thereby meeting the expectation of what should happen to a Christian in the presence of God. Therefore, what could be characterized as an ideological dilemma, the interviewee solves by characterizing being accepted unconditionally and the expectation of change as not mutually exclusive. He does this by referring to God's divine, transforming intervention.

The experiences with sexual orientation change efforts varied greatly amongst the participants. The following quote offers a different account of these efforts (Interview 7):

> *…I started thinking that like, I don't think I'm going to be rid of this homosexuality, and that was a harrowing thought for me. I remember this complete like, hopelessness in thinking is this how my life will go, that I can never again touch a woman? I- it was like a physical like, pain and longing like, I don't know if I can live like this? Can I like meet the celibacy requirements? Do I need to, do I have to just marry a man, then? Or could I be alone? I thought about these, these things a lot, and somehow I reached the conclusion that I, I can't be with a man, either, that it somehow wouldn't like be fair to the man, either, if I happened to find one, that umm… It somehow started to feel like I can't change, and it was like a clear awareness that this thing won't change, making it a choice of whether to live alone and celibate, or not. So it, it like became clear that, that it's not going to like, change. Like for example that I start, that I would start getting interested in, umm, men. And, and umm, it was like terribly hard, because I like at the same time that, God won't like accept this, so, how can I combine these two things? I can't. Like there's no, no such, so the only, the only*

option if I want to continue having faith in God, is to struggle with this issue for the rest of my life.

Here homosexuality is described as something to be rid of, while relating hopelessness over the impossibility of it all at the same time. This interviewee reflects on the option of celibacy, and on the option of marrying a person of the opposite sex, using what could be described as imperative language, where her options are strictly mandated and sanctioned. If she wants to believe in God, and have God accept her choices, she needs to go in one of two specific directions. Arriving at the conclusion that she cannot manage either acceptable option, at least not without great difficulty, she envisions experiencing struggles for the rest of her life. The ideological dilemma here presents itself through the unattainable options that are presented as a moral prerequisite for faith and God's acceptance. The acceptable options seem painful, even unattainable for this interviewee; yet she does not see a possible reconciliation between her sexuality and her faith. Comparing to the previous quote, here the interviewee does not attempt to present God's acceptance as unconditional. In fact, she uses an extreme case formulation of life-long struggles to define the impossibility of the situation, highlighting this ideological dilemma. She positions herself as either *accepted* or not, completely depending on her actions and choices. There is also a similarity in positioning compared to the previous interpretative repertoire, where another interviewee stated, that she would have needed to completely give up her faith, had she decided to date women. The same positioning is found in this quote, where the interviewee positions herself *faithless*, if choosing a partner of the same sex.

One interviewee reflects on his experiences with the framing of same sex attraction within reparative therapy and faith tradition in general (Interview 3):

…and particularly in reparative therapy you go very deep into this area, and, umm, that's how it was for me, too, that, that Christian psychotherapists, and, umm prayer ministers, whom I was praying with, always tried to look into my childhood to see if, if something had happened there. Did a man at some point rape me or, or like hurt me, explaining why I would want to, or why, why there was a tendency within me to, umm, depart from masculinity to, to like not be one with the masculinity within me, but to look for the masculine in a sexual relationship with a man. This was the basic doctrine.
[…]
And had you like figured this out, like what would then have happened?

> *Then one could have like, umm, embraced one's own masculinity in a secure way, and that would lead to a heteronorm- heteronormative behavior.*
> […]
> *So a sort of double reality emerged for me, or a, a pseudo-identity, where I on the one hand know what I'm feeling and I have, like every day I am aware of these feelings, but, then I have my born again nature, where I know these qualities should exist, where supposedly the heteronormative, like, predisposition is supposed to be, umm. I don't feel it but, but they say it's there, so, it has to be there.*
> […]
> *But yeah no, I didn't see any hope anymore. Every once in a while, I saw these glimpses of like, no this has to work and like this person of faith, so to speak, within me awoke, that, that, that God wants to and God is able and He has already done everything and now like I am just supposed to trust that and I should align myself, in faith, according to what is true and it will work and there will be a breakthrough and it's always the darkest right before, before dawn and like, all these like, pump it, like I can't give up now.*

Here we again see homosexuality being constructed as symptomatic of something else. The interviewee discerns a kind of quest in his therapeutic interactions, where the premise was that a specific source to his same sex attraction is to be identified, so as to explain, and ultimately treat his non-heterosexual orientation, putting him *on the road to transformation*, a desired position identified in one of the earlier quotes as well. He also identifies a "born again nature", and an "inner person of faith", which represent a sort of ideal, the person that already is free from the same sex attraction, which is deemed solely an effect of trauma, or brokenness.

The interviewee employs active footing in this quote. Stepping into this identity of the "inner person of faith" is one the one hand framed as a simple, or at least attainable choice, an act of faith, aligning with the position of *already transformed*. On the other hand, the interviewee later, as in the previous quote, relates hopelessness over the impossibility of achieving this. This highlights the ideological dilemma between sexual orientation and religious conviction. The position of *accepted* is achieved through engaging in sexual orientation change efforts and believing in its validity and success potential. The prerequisite of the position of *already transformed* is that one applies the right perspective, or as the interview expresses it, simply "aligns oneself" according to the truth claims regarding sexual orientation within his faith tradition. The interviewee

describes at the end, how he used metaphors like "it's always darkest before dawn", to dismiss the impossibility or hopelessness of sexual orientation change, and to maintain that homosexuality can and should be fixed, in time, regardless of a seemingly long wait.

One of the last persons I interviewed had a long history of himself being engaged in sexual orientation change efforts and supporting others in this endeavor as well. He stated that there absolutely should be a freedom of choice, that no one should be pressured into sexual change efforts, but maintained that it would be possible for everyone, saying that there is hope for anyone who wants to change (Interview 5):

> ***Yes, and sure I, I understand the freedom of choice which you surely would allow for everyone, but what if somebody would want to, umm, correct or like, restore, or whichever words one might use, their sexuality then, do you see that for some it just isn't like possible, necessarily?***
> *Mm*
> ***You say there is hope…***
> *Yes*
> ***…but does it mean, does it necessarily mean that everyone can do it?***
> *Somehow I, yes. Somehow I do think that everyone can. Well, that they just need to take into account that this sin won't cease to exist.*
> ***Right***
> *But like what you do with it, what you do with it like, you can't keep a bird from flying over your head, but you can prevent it from building a nest in your hair, so like what meaning you assign to it then…*
> ***Yes, right.***
> *…to the things, like what, what… perspective in life you focus on, and how, like how much space in your life you give to it, that's also one issue and, and then the fact that, then there are also people who are always like blaming something outside of themselves, either the community, their family or the church or, or like their own childhood, or God or, something so that, or the Enemy so like, they forget to look within themselves.*

This quote reflects the importance of having the process of sexual orientation change efforts, or even the hopes for it, ongoing. Sexual orientation is also defined as something that absolutely can change. Ongoing same sex attraction during change efforts should be viewed as a natural part of the ongoing temptations we face in life, not prompting one to lose hope for change. The interviewee connects the reasons for existence of same sex attraction at least partly with a person's own actions and attitudes,

and also places responsibility on a person to make efforts to change their non-heterosexual orientation. He deems those who are unsuccessful, or inactive in their sexual orientation change efforts as people who simply seek to blame circumstances, others, or God, instead of looking to themselves for a solution, placing them in a position of *avoiding responsibility*. On the other side of this positioning, those who press on with sexual orientation change efforts would then be people who are *accepted*, as they take responsibility, stand against temptation, and do not "let birds build a nest in their hair", a reference to a quote by Martin Luther commonly used to underline the difference between actual sin and mere temptation. This Luther quote is instrumental in creating a clear divide between same sex attraction and homosexual orientation, which is a central distinction made in this interpretative repertoire.

Here, the legitimacy or success of sexual orientation change efforts is not primarily evaluated by measuring an actual change, but rather by which perspective one adopts towards the process. While this interviewee does not use the word acceptance or accepted, I would be inclined to liken the concepts created here with the position of *accepted*, or not, here, depending on one's approach to engaging in sexual orientation change efforts. While the interviewee does not claim subject positions for himself in a very straight forward manner, he does so indirectly through footing, placing others than himself, those with differing attitudes and choices, in the more undesirable subject positions, creating a distance to them, thereby positioning himself, through his actions and perspective, as *accepted*.

5.1.3 Homosexuality as a conduit of social stigma and exclusion

This interpretative repertoire is constructed largely by reports of various negative social repercussions associated with homosexuality, or same sex attraction. The interviewees shared accounts of being ashamed of their same sex attraction, and in general perceiving homosexuality as an orientation that is shameful. They also related fear of, and experiences of stigmatization, based largely on things they directly heard members of their faith community say about homosexuality. In addition, the interviewees expressed fear of, and experiences of exclusion, even to the point of excommunication.

The main ideological dilemma within this interpretative repertoire was between embracing one's non-heterosexual orientation and being accepted within the faith

community. The shame expressed by the interviewees was often related to an unwillingness, or incapability to talk about their sexual orientation with others in their faith community, positioning them on the outside of the community, at least as far as their homosexuality or same sex attraction was concerned. The same can be said of their fear of and experiences of stigmatization and exclusion. Because of the framing of homosexuality within their faith community, and the social repercussions linked to a homosexual orientation, the interviewees often claimed a position which could be characterized as a *stigmatized outsider*. A strategy for both dealing with the aforementioned ideological dilemma, and distancing oneself from this aforementioned position, was not to acknowledge, or not to speak openly about one's same sex attraction, so as to position oneself as an accepted member of the in-group, a position simply named *accepted,* Another recurring positioning was related to shame, here named *ashamed*.

In a way this interpretative repertoire has commonalities with first one, framing homosexuality as a sin, although here the focus is on the social consequences stemming from the perceived sinfulness, while interviewees within the first interpretative repertoire relate more of an internalized perception, and internal consequences of sinfulness. In the first interpretative repertoire the claimed subject positions take place on an individual, and spiritual level, here they occur on a social level.

Most of the participants reported not discussing their same sex attraction with anyone, within or outside their faith communities, for many years after first realizing these feelings for themselves, mostly because of shame or fear of social stigma, as in this account (Interview 6):

> *Well probably the only time it would come up was during discussions in youth group, about like, umm, homosexuality or these kinds of things, and how they were discussed, like, umm, how it was assumed that this kind of experience wouldn't exist within our church, and like… This made me anxious like, umm, when the discussion moved towards these kind of topics…*
> ***What do you remember, like, what was the anxiety about, what thoughts and feelings…?***
> *Umm, like probably a kind of fear of being exposed. Like, during those discussions I could experience social anxiety and become afraid of somehow being exposed.*

What type of talk did you hear exactly in this youth group? What words might have been used to describe these people?
Like, I don't remember specifically, but there was like a kind of wondering or condescending tone in those discussions and, and like since, at that time there started to be more general discussion about these things, sometimes in the early 2000s, so, so like there was this kind of questioning of it all and such…
[…]
But the general understanding has simply been that, that umm, it's like, it's this thing that one can like, somehow talk, umm..
Like one has permission?
One has permission to like, talk about and even laugh at it and, and like, somehow like criticize that thing like…
And you didn't want to be on the receiving end of that?
Yes, exactly…

Some of the answers given here by the interviewee are initially quite vague, so some follow-up questions were necessary for clarification. She mostly avoids using the word "homosexual", or "homosexuality", or words clearly describing same sex attraction; instead she uses expressions such as "these things", or "this kind of experience". In addition to being vague, and not recalling specifics, the interviewee also pauses a lot, often saying "umm" and "like". All of this can at least in part imply uncertainty or hesitation, which is to be understood as she is sharing a sensitive, difficult experience. She says that she felt anxious when the conversation in church youth group moved to the topic of homosexuality, that it incited within her a fear of being exposed. After being asked to specify, she describes homosexuality as something that one was allowed to make fun of or criticize; and affirmed that she did not want to be subjected to this herself. She also states that she did not know how to discuss her experience with anyone. This relates a fear of social stigma, a central element in this interpretative repertoire. It also highlights the ideological dilemma between embracing a non-heterosexual orientation and being accepted within the faith community.

Employing category entitlement, the interviewee, as a member of the church she is describing, relates an understanding of a collective assumption that no one within the church community would experience same sex attraction. Employing reported speech, she potentially positions anyone experiencing same sex attraction, including herself, outside the church community, as someone it is okay to make fun of and criticize; as a *stigmatized outsider*. However, by not letting her experiences of same sex attraction be

known, she is able to claim the position of *accepted*. At the end of this quote the interviewee also confirms that she did not want to be laughed at, so by not sharing her feelings of attraction to other women, she was also avoiding the position of *ashamed.*

One interviewee responds to a question on how he perceived that the churches he was affiliated with related to people who were engaged in; or had been engaged in sexual orientation change efforts (Interview 5):

> *(Sighs) Well, generally it's like this, that it's easier to say that I've been a criminal I've been to prison, or I'm a former alcoholic, but if it relates in any way to sexuality, it's taboo.*

This response associates a greater stigma to same sex attraction, than to prison sentences or alcoholism. The interviewee uses extreme case formulations to emphasize the shameful nature of same sex attraction, even when engaged in sexual orientation change efforts. Thus, he indirectly claims the subject position of *ashamed* for himself. He also recalled a troubling experience once during a Christian seminar on inner healing, where he shared a personal testimony relating to same sex attraction (Interview 5):

> *I do remember at these healing seminars as well, where I've shared my story. I do remember somewhere in [name of city], where we were and well, I up and walked right out of there as I had delivered my speech, and I was thinking I am never coming back to that auditorium again. I mean it was somehow like, you make these interpretations when you look at the audience there and well, like, wonder what that one is thinking and somehow the shame was so (sighs), it was intense, which, with which the Enemy sort of also binds you, so that you wouldn't say anything, say anything in a positive sense.*

Here he expresses shame, which leads to an impulse of excluding himself from the Christian community in question, thereby initially claiming the positions *ashamed* and *stigmatized outsider*. The ideological dilemma is not about embracing homosexuality, rather simply between sharing experiences of same sex attraction, and being accepted within the faith community. A way of navigating this dilemma can be seen by the way the interviewee attributes his shame at least in part to the Devil, which he refers to as the Enemy. The premise is that the Devil binds him from saying things that are actually positive, by making him feel ashamed. By adopting this approach, he can delegitimize the feelings of shame concerning his story, and thereby distance himself from the

position of *ashamed*, employing narrative organization to rather claim the position of *accepted*.

Those interviewees who later on developed more affirming approaches to homosexuality shared experiences of exclusion from church practices, as a result of embracing a homosexual orientation. They assumed that any leadership positions in church would no longer be open to them, assumptions that were mostly validated. One interviewee relates her difficulties finding a church within her own faith tradition where she would be accepted and also qualify for ministry positions (Interview 2):

> *If I want the Evangelical free churches, I have no alternatives. Me and my gay friend have had discussions on whether we should start a church in [name of region], where like everyone would be welcomed, to serve, to be themselves. But, it's only been in the planning stages and many people who- with whom we've discussed this with, have said that it would be much easier if they could come to an already existing church, where the outlook of the pastors and elders could be changed so that they would accept gays and gays would be welcomed. Like, so it would be easier than going off to start your own church. So, this kind of thing has been in the works, and, and well, there simply is no Evangelical free church here in [name of region], which would let homosexuals do, anything. There's [name of church] in [name of city], and they apparently have a homosexual employee, but that person not in a relationship so, because of this, they can be involved in ministry. However, in every case, if you live in that sin, meaning a romantic relationship, then all bets are off. And, I've gone to the church openly like "Hey, I'm gay, I'm going to be in a relationship, I love God, Jesus. I'd like to come here and work with you, but, the decision is of course yours." But so yeah, it's tricky, umm, I know that the Lutheran church, they have this, rainbow church service, but, my God, I'm not Lutheran, I don't get anything out of it. Some of my friends have gone and they've told me it's super boring, that it's not something one can suffer through. And umm, then there's this [name of organization for LGBTIQ+ people of faith]. I've never been there, I should check it out. But anyway my options are extremely limited, in [name of region], which is crazy, that there's no Evangelical free church you can attend as a gay Christian, and be a part of the ministry. There are none.*

In this account the interviewee describes how she does not believe she can find a single Evangelical free church, where she as an openly gay person would be welcomed as an active, serving member. This highlights the ideological dilemma between embracing one's non-heterosexual orientation and being accepted within the faith community.

While it might seem like the interviewee claims that no gay people would be welcome in the churches of her faith tradition, she does however make a clear distinction between herself as someone open to pursuing a romantic relationship with another woman, and a person who identifies as gay, but remains single. This again comes down to the expectation of managing one's non-heterosexual orientation, rather than embracing it. Since the interviewee intends to pursue romantic relations with other women, she thus positions herself as an outsider in her faith tradition, not fit for ministry, claiming the position of *stigmatized outsider*. One of the main rhetorical devices she employs is reported speech, accounting for others' experiences of navigating a similar experience and for the stance of church leaders. She describes in clear words and detail how she has presented herself and what the outcome has been thereof. These accounts are central to her approach and to her claimed position as *stigmatized outsider*. She also relies heavily on category entitlement, making it clear that she is part of this specific faith tradition. Many of her comments address her familiarity with her church, its leaders and its standpoints, making it hard to contest the account she provides of her experiences or the conclusions she draws from these experiences with the faith tradition in question.

The interviewee has made a thorough account of the existing, or rather non-existent options she sees for finding the kind of church community she would like to be a part of, leading her to consider founding a new congregation, where everyone would be welcomed as they are. By doing this, it seems as she is mapping out all potential options, and even creating new ones, in an attempt to negotiate her position as an outsider, employing both category entitlement, reported speech and narrative organization. She is also navigating the ideological dilemma between embracing her non-heterosexual orientation and being accepted within the faith community. Thus, she claims another subject position, named *struggling to find a church home*, as an air of homelessness can be discerned within this position. It is constructed out of experiences and accounts of social exclusion, implying a quest for belonging.

Another interviewee was approached by a church elder about excommunication shortly after coming out as gay (Interview 7):

> *It was probably a month, after I came out, umm, when this church leader, this sixty plus year old man, suddenly stood behind my door. He rang the doorbell and, and then I of course invited him in, and even made some coffee. (longer pause) And with what I know now, I*

wouldn't even had let him in, but then, then I did, as I didn't really know what else to do. And then he said, sat down at my kitchen table and said, well, so men aren't good enough for you then. And (laughs), I said that well, well no. And, and then I said that I have tried to for years, tried to change myself. Then he said that should you perhaps have tried even harder. (Longer pause, laughs a little)
[…]
It seems to have caught you a bit off guard?
Well yes, yes it did. Like well, sure, I could have tried harder. But then he said that, you do know that we're sort of under pressure to excommunicate you? And I said I know, of course. Would it be easier if I resign on my own? Well he said it would. And so I, umm, wrote a paper stating my umm, resignation from the church and, and then I added this Bible passage umm, saying I'm confident that nothing, no depth, how does it go umm…
Well saying that nothing can separate you, or us, from God's love.
Yes, exactly. So, I deliberately put, put that one into the letter of res-resignation. And, and that's how it went, and no one has contacted me since.

This account relates the interviewee's experience of being excluded from their faith community as a direct consequence of coming out as gay. By means of narrative organization, she tells the story in a way that lets us know she expected her coming out to have this outcome, even though the she was surprised by the manner in which the excommunication was set in motion. There were different options for her in how to respond to the situation, and she opted to resign her church membership herself, rather than to await excommunication, quite promptly and proactively claiming the position of *stigmatized outsider*. At the same time, she recalls choosing to include a Bible quote in her letter of resignation, which stated that nothing could separate her from God's love. This highlights a distinction between acceptance and love from God, and acceptance from the church. While she can be seen to not position herself as *accepted* because of the stance of her church, you could say she attempts to manage the ripple effects by making the distinction of this having no effect on how she is loved by God. Nonetheless, the ideological dilemma between embracing one's non-heterosexual orientation and being accepted within the faith community is highlighted in this quote. The interviewee also emphasizes her position as *stigmatized outsider* by mentioning, that no one from the church contacted her after the event described.

The interviewee employs reported speech in her account, as she is largely describing a conversation she had with another person. She also laughs on two occasions, and actively changes footing. These rhetorical devices work together to frame the interviewee's account. While recounting the words of the church elder who visited her, regarding how she perhaps should have tried harder in her sexual orientation change efforts, the interviewee laughs, and also comments on what he said: "*Like well, sure, I could have tried harder*". This can be seen as dismissive, and an attempt to affect the manner in which the narrative is received. The interviewee makes a point of mentioning she would not have invited the church leader in, had she known more at the time, from which we can infer that the events that followed were unpleasant for her. In such a case laughter may provide emotional distance, and alleviation after the fact. The change in footing while employing reported speech serves to distinguish the perspective of the interviewee from the perspective of the church elder.

5.1.4 Affirmation of homosexuality

Although all participants at some point in their interviews framed homosexuality negatively, or embracing homosexuality as something negative, there were accounts of affirmation of a non-heterosexual orientation as well. However, the affirming approaches that make up this interpretative repertoire were constructed mainly against, or even in opposition to the perceived norms and values of their heteronormative faith communities. Within this repertoire, homosexuality was considered acceptable *regardless of* previous personal convictions, or current views within the faith community. In some instances, the interviewees still stated that homosexuality might not be morally defensible, but that other life choices made by people accepted within their faith community were equally, or even more morally indefensible, meaning homosexuality thus was acceptable *by comparison*.

While based in affirmation, this interpretative repertoire is not free from conditions and contradictions. Some ideological dilemmas of the previous interpretative repertoires could be discerned in this repertoire as well, although not as prominently. The dilemma between embracing one's non-heterosexual orientation and being accepted within the faith community was quite prominent here, as in the third repertoire. An affirming approach to a non-heterosexual orientation often meant leaving the faith community completely, potentially losing out on future employment, and facing other negative

social repercussions. Within this repertoire, the interviewees constructed an affirmation of homosexuality as a legitimate sexual orientation even as a Christian, weakening the dilemma with morally reconciling one's sexual orientation with one's faith, contrary to what was observed within the first repertoire**.** Still, this ideological dilemma was not completely absent here, either, as interviewees still reported having doubts on the moral legitimacy of their sexual orientation from time to time. The dilemma between the expectation to change one's non-heterosexual orientation and yet not being able to, was however resolved. Within this interpretative repertoire, the interviewees expressed acceptance of not being able to change their sexual orientation.

I have discerned subject positions that were claimed within this repertoire as *accepted, equal, unequal,* and *stigmatized outsider*. The footing employed around the subject positions concerning equality was especially prominent, involving a lot of comparison. However, the various rhetorical devices employed for achieving this will be elaborated on further on.

This interviewee shares how he developed a more affirming view on homosexuality (Interview 1):

> *And there was a lot of like, umm, gradual movement towards acceptance. So, like it was actually never a question of salvation for me, so that like if you were in a romantic relationship with a man, that you would go to hell. I don't remember such a time*
> ***Right.***
> *But, I did for example still think back then, that you need to, like if, if you're gay I think it's okay to be in a relationship with a man as long as you lead a life that otherwise pleases God, so… But like, but then you couldn't for example be in a position of leadership. So I would categorize it sort of like the same way as for example when you spoke about remarriage, like the church has been able to find a sort of… So like even though Biblically it's quite strict, like, like sort of a judgmental view, but still the church has managed to renew itself regarding that issue, as with the issue of slavery and the position of women. (laughs a little)*

Here we again see the organization of one's personal narrative used as a rhetorical device. The interviewee describes gradually moving towards a more affirming approach to homosexuality, based on growing insights into other controversial issues within the church. At first, he held the belief that a relationship with another man meant that you

could not be in a church leadership position, and that you had to live your life otherwise in a way that pleased God. This implies that the relationship with another man was something not pleasing to God, so the rest of one's life should then be lived in a different manner. Later on, he still characterizes the Biblical standpoint on homosexuality as firm and judgmental, but in line with his current convictions, he makes a case for revising the churches standpoint on this issue, referring to the revisions made in other issues such as slavery, remarriage and the rights of women.

The ideological dilemma of morally reconciling one's sexual orientation with one's faith is still somewhat present in this quote, as the interviewee still sees that he would only be accepted under certain conditions if he were gay. One can also infer that he might still not believe that being gay would be pleasing to God. The ideological dilemma of embracing one's non-heterosexual orientation versus being accepted within the faith community is also present, as the interviewee communicates his understanding of not being able to simultaneously be in a romantic relationship with another man and hold a position of leadership in the church, which connects to the claimed subject positions. In a sense the interviewee positions himself as *unequal*, since the church leadership positions might not be available to him if he chose to be in a relationship with another man. He does however attempt to negotiate for the *equal* position, referring to revisions made by the church in the past. He laughs while referring to the revisions made for slavery and female rights within the church, which considering the seriousness of these topics hardly can be seen as an attempt at humor, but a way of managing how his account is received. Laughter in this situation could be a means for pointing out the irony of the church not making reforms for one, specific issue, while concessions have been made in relation to others.

Another interviewee presents an affirming approach to homosexuality, while still struggling to balance the discrepancy between her own convictions and the stance of her faith community (Interview 2):

> ***So, what do you think of the fact that you can't so to speak do anything, except maybe the dishes? That you can't like, take part in any ministry or…?***
> *What do I think? God, I'd like go and shoot people with a cannon, but yeah, so I'm angry.*
> ***Right***

I am angry, and it doesn't feel nice, and umm, we've tried like, I have this gay friend in church. We've worked on this issue with the pastors there and, we've tried to keep up discussions. We've presented them with material, like theological material on how one could view this issue of homosexuality differently, because we have the arguments, the theological arguments for how, in what way we could also exist on the Christian scene.

Right I was supposed to ask, even though it already became clear, but would you say again like, your own point of view, theological point of view on your sexual identity?

Well at this point I think I can be gay; I can be a Christian, I can be in a romantic relationship with a woman if I want to. God loves me.

This interviewee has found theological basis for it being acceptable to be gay. She says that she can be gay, and Christian, and even be in a romantic relationship if she wants, emphasizing her point of view by mentioning all of these things in the same sentence. However, an ideological dilemma presents itself through the leadership of her church not sharing her views, namely the dilemma between embracing one's non-heterosexual orientation and being accepted within the faith community. The interviewee affirms that she as a gay person is not allowed to hold positions of leadership or responsibility in the church; and says that it makes her angry. Her affirming view on homosexuality is constructed in contrast to contrary views held by her faith community. She distances herself quite forcefully from the viewpoint of her church, using an extreme expression to express her displeasure with their views: "*I'd like go and shoot people with a cannon*". While this surely is hyperbole, it effectively presents a lack of viable options for solving the ideological dilemma, or from claiming a desired subject position.

The interviewee says that she has been trying to negotiate with the church leadership, presenting material to support her affirming view of homosexuality, apparently so far to no avail. One can discern positioning as *stigmatized outsider*, as she expresses her unsuccessful attempt to get recognition and legitimation for even existing as a gay person in a Christian setting. There is also positioning of *unequal,* as the same recognition and opportunities are not available to her as a gay person within her faith community. However, the interviewee can be characterized as still trying to negotiate these subject positions within this repertoire, as she is attempting to change the views within her faith community which create these positions. She again claims the same subject position she claimed in the previous repertoire: *in search of a church home*.

However, the most affirming position is claimed in relation to God, as she clearly claims the position of *accepted*, as loved by God.

This interviewee presents a mainly relativist argument in favor of affirming homosexuality as a legitimate sexual orientation for a Christian (Interview 7):

> *Well, it just somehow started slowly happening. Perhaps also this, that, like, how I was treated, how my ex treated me, then, then somehow like the idea that darn it, if they think they're good enough for God, then why wouldn't I be? Like, what makes me, like worse than them, who are behaving in like this really… Lying, and, and like omitting things, slandering, li- like this completely inconceivable… So, surely I can't like be in like the lowest cast here if those like true believers really are behaving in that way.*
> […]
> *…I've like been introduced to social circles where I like know gay Christians, and, and I think I mentioned our super-secret group, whi- which is like a group for gay Christians. Some have already come out, some haven't. And, and, like, I've like found this sort of peer support like, okay, these two things are compatible.*
> […]
> *It's somehow a fascinating, a fascinating thought that, that, that, that, that I've had the exact same right… to act like I had acted prior to coming out and th- and this is like funny because, I wasn't straight (laughs) like back then, either! But, since people didn't know, then, then there wasn't this like same kind of conflict. So, like it sort of makes a frightfully big difference, the pressure people place on you, the framing, how, how you can like be. So, so also my thinking that you can't be gay and a believer, that you can only be either, that… That, that like is supported a lot by how others feel about it. And, and now for the first time in my life I've found [number] people who believe, that you can be both gay and Christian.*

In this account the interviewee never clearly says that she herself thinks it is acceptable to be gay. She relates to the ideological dilemma of morally reconciling one's sexual orientation with one's faith. At first, the she compares herself to members of her former faith community, arriving at the conclusion that she is morally no worse than them, regardless of being gay, thus claiming the subject position of *equal*. She also works through the previously mentioned ideological dilemma of not being able to reconcile one's sexual orientation with one's faith, by expanding it to apply to any other issue, not only a non-heterosexual orientation. She makes a case for other issues being equally incompatible with Christian faith, thus placing everyone on equal footing.

Later on, the interviewee refers to new people she met, and how they showed her that it is possible to be both Christian and gay. By highlighting the significance of social context and referring to these other gay Christians, she employs category entitlement to motivate her revised standpoint reconciling Christianity and being gay. Through narrative organization she highlights the development of her views over time, even in this quote alone. However, looking at it from an even broader perspective, we can include a comparison of this quote and the views she expressed having in the quote starting on page 44 (the second quote in section 5.1.2). There she related the complete impossibility of embracing a non-heterosexual orientation because of her faith, a stark contrast to the affirming approach of being both gay and Christian she presents here.

Before coming out, this interviewee had held various positions of leadership at her church. She laughs and points out that she was able to act freely within her church before coming out, even though she was just as gay back then, the only difference being that no one else was aware of her sexual orientation before. This laughter combined with highlighting the lack of difference in her behavior or performance before versus after coming out, can be seen as a way of calling into question the church's practice of removing openly gay members from positions of leadership and responsibility simply because of being aware of their non-heterosexual orientation.

6 Discussion

The aim of this study is to increase understanding towards same sex attracted persons with backgrounds in heteronormative Christian faith communities, both within and outside these communities. I will now summarize and discuss my findings, relating them to previous, similar research, after which a discussion on the ethical aspects and limitations of the study will follow. Lastly, I will reflect upon the application of the study and potential future research.

6.1 Summary of the Findings

The topic and focus remained the same throughout this study, without modification, which was identity negotiations of same sex attracted persons within heteronormative Christian faith communities in Finland. My aim was to be open to whatever findings the gathered interview material presented, while still staying within the determined topic. I found that the interviews indeed produced material relevant to the research question: *How persons experiencing same sex attraction negotiate their identities within, or against heteronormative Christian faith communities.* The participants were found to mainly construct interpretative repertoires regarding homosexuality, or same sex attraction. Four interpretative repertoires were identified as follows: "Homosexuality as a sin", "Fixing homosexuality?", "Homosexuality as a conduit of social stigma and exclusion", and "Affirmation of homosexuality". Within these repertoires various subject positions were claimed and some ideological dilemmas emerged. The claimed subject positions ranged from *sinful, hell bound,* and *ashamed* to *equal,* and *accepted.* There was overlap in the subject positions found in each repetoire, the most common overlapping positioning being *accepted* versus some less desired subject position, depending on one's approach to same sex attraction and homosexuality. The ideological dilemmas that emerged were between embracing one's non-heterosexual orientation and being accepted within the faith community, between reconciling one's sexual orientation with one's faith, and between the expectation to change one's non-heterosexual orientation and yet not being able to do so.

In line with the findings of Hillier et al. (2008), as well as Gibbs (2015), and Yip (2007), this study also found a connection between issues concerning wellbeing and a

lack of affirmation of a non-heterosexual orientation. However, this was only the case with the participants who had later developed more affirming approaches themselves. Those still engaged in sexual orientation change efforts did not report any issues with wellbeing that they connected to the heteronormative views within their church. One of the main ideological dilemmas which emerged in the interviews was reconciling one's faith with a non-heterosexual orientation. In Thumma's (1991) study of gay Christians within the organization "Good News", the participants shifted their theology to affirm a homosexual orientation, a strategy also employed by some of the participants in this study. Strategies were also employed to avoid social stigma, or the position of *stigmatized outsider*, in similar ways as found by Yip (1997). One of these strategies Yip (1997) discerned, included dismissing the authority of the church in passing moral judgment on homosexuality, something also noted by Yip and Gross (2010). The participants in this study deflected moral judgement of their church in a similar way. Even though some still viewed homosexuality as a sin, they compared it to other sins not equally frowned upon in the church, thereby arguing same sex relationships should be equally accepted as for example the remarriage of divorcees. Positive personal experiences of being able to embrace a homosexual orientation and maintaining Christian values in one's life was also referenced, as in Yip's (1997) study, however in this study the examples and experiences of other gay Christians were also referred to by the participants. Also, there was a clear difference on one point with employed strategies for achieving acceptance and affirmation. The participants of this study who developed more affirming approaches to homosexuality mostly opted for leaving their church community due to issues with social stigmatization and struggles with their wellbeing, while many participants in the study by Yip and Gross (2010) opted for staying, with the mindset of being part of a change towards greater inclusivity within their church. As was the case in this study, Ratinen (2015) also noted that affirming approaches on homosexuality was mainly experienced outside the participants' faith communities, or as a result or their own, personal theological reflections. One can reflect on the potential effects of the cultural context of these studies, as Yip and Gross (2010) included French and British participants, while all participants in this study, and Ratinen's (2015), were Finnish.

In their study, Kejonen and Ratinen (2017) discerned ongoing negotiations by the participants of the conditions of being accepted as a gay person within the faith

tradition. This was very similar to the identity negotiations of the participants of this study. Within three interpretative repertoires room for acceptance was made only for same sex attraction, and only under certain conditions, but not for embracing a non-heterosexual orientation. Within the repertoire "Affirmation of homosexuality", some found acceptance for being both gay and Christian.

Shame was also a recurring theme in the interviews, relating to same sex attraction and homosexuality, in light of religious norms and conviction, much in a similar way as s noted by Ratinen (2014, 2015). Most had not spoken about their same sex attraction due to perceptions of stigmatization related to non-heterosexual orientation. The interpretative repertoire "Homosexuality as a conduit of social stigma and exclusion" was constructed mainly by experiences of shame, social stigma, and exclusion, and fear thereof. Participants in this study also made choices mandated by the heteronormative expectations within faith tradition, and their own religious convictions, as found by Ratinen (2015). These ranged from choice of faith community to choice of spouse.

While the findings of this study can be discussed in the light of previous research, too many direct comparisons or generalizations should be avoided, as most other studies differ in at least some significant aspect, such as field of research, theoretical and methodological approach, or cultural and religious context. However, the particular nature of this study highlights its relevant contribution to the field of research within social psychology, and to other research done on the topic of non-heterosexual orientation in a heteronormative, religious context. By conducting in-depth interviews aimed at discerning the participants' own constructions and negotiations of identity, and by applying a critical discursive approach to the analysis of the interview material, this study has been able to provide a perspective not well represented in previous research on this topic, especially within the Finnish context.

6.2 Ethical Aspects and Limitations of the Study

I have reflected extensively on my role in the interviews and my personal approach to the entire study. To be as transparent as possible about my personal connection to the research topic, or lack thereof, I informed the participants of my own familiarity with the theology and culture of Evangelical free churches, as well as my lack of personal experience of unwanted same sex attraction within that context. Some expressed

concerns relating to anonymity or to how they would come across in their interview, regardless of their anonymity. This made me aware of the participants being concerned not just with how they would be perceived, if their views and experiences were known, but also with how I viewed them, regardless of potentially no one else knowing what they had disclosed in their interview. In an attempt to communicate an open, judgement-free approach, I informed participants that I was interviewing both persons who were actively still engaged in sexual orientation change efforts as well as persons who had embraced an affirming approach to homosexuality. I tried to make sure that everyone knew they would be met with equal consideration and respect, regardless of their views on any of the topics touched upon in the interviews. Still, I have to acknowledge the participants potentially seeing me as a representative of the heteronormative views of the church leadership within their faith traditions, especially if their church background was similar to mine. The knowledge of me previously having been active in Evangelical free churches would imply me having held positions of responsibility and leadership, and inadvertently being in agreement with most of the theology and ethical guidelines represented in that faith tradition. At the same time, including persons with a more affirming approach to non-heterosexual orientation in this study could have been seen as a shift in interests, theology or values, in a way where they no longer aligned with those within my own faith tradition or the faith tradition of the participants, which might have made the those still engaged in sexual orientation change efforts uneasy. The participants with non-affirming views on homosexuality expressed awareness of a stigma relating to sexual orientation change efforts outside of their faith communities. Some of these expressed concerns for having their non-affirming views and their engagement in sexual orientation change efforts exposed, particularly to anyone who might question their views, their life choices or perhaps even their families. This again highlights the complexity and diversity of challenges in managing a non-heterosexual orientation or same sex attraction in, or from within a heteronormative faith community. Regardless of which reservations the interviewees might have had towards me or my motives for the study, it is absolutely possible that they might have edited their answers to better align with the views they thought that I represented, or in order to avoid being seen in a bad light, by me or anyone familiarizing themselves with this study regardless of participant anonymity.

While no definite conclusions can be drawn on the interviewees' thoughts or potential reservations relating to my personal connection with the research topic, I feel confident in mainly perceiving it as a benefit in my position as interviewer. Due to my background in Evangelical free churches, and understanding of various faith traditions in Finland, I believe I was more capable of formulating questions relevant to the research question and taking into account issues only understood within certain faith traditions. I was able to anticipate, understand and allay many insecurities the participants expressed before and throughout their interviews. Of course, this also then had its own possible effects on the meanings being constructed in the interviews. Early on in the study, I realized that I needed to ask more detailed follow-up questions. Many times I believed that I understood what an interviewee's initial response implied, but I did not think it would be clear to anyone who lacked profound understanding of the topic that was being discussed or its context. Regardless of sometimes asking interviewees to phrase their answers like they would be talking to someone completely lacking insight into the norms and values of Christian faith communities, they could still have been overwhelmingly focused on who they were speaking to in that moment and relying on a certain shared understanding of the discussed themes.

In summary of the evaluation of my personal connection to this research topic, I would say that while acknowledging its potential effects on the study and its outcomes, it could be questioned whether this type of study would easily have been constructed without personal connection or motive. It is my inference that those without personal experiences of faith communities would struggle with discerning the intricacies of the cultural and religious aspects that surround such deeply personal and nuanced topics as identity negotiations or sexual orientation within that specific context. And without this discernment, one would be hard pressed to find the motivation for conducting related research.

This is a qualitative study with only seven participants, and it has been conducted in a very specific context. My aim was not to generate generally applicable results, but to shed light on, create a deeper understanding of, and open up more discussion on a specific phenomenon, concerning a specific group of people, in a specific context. However, this does not mean that the findings of this study would not have relevance for other, similar contexts, conducted with similar theoretic and methodological approach (Goodman, 2008).

Something I touched upon in my ethical considerations, was that my understanding before initiating this study was that persons dealing with unwanted same sex attraction, or a non-heterosexual orientation within heteronormative Christian faith communities, face a profound lack of understanding, as well as lack a profound sense of belonging, both within and outside their faith communities. While the scope of this study is too small to draw generally applicable conclusions in the matter, it is worth mentioning that the findings of this study do seem to support this notion. Those engaged in sexual orientation change efforts, who also expressed being content with their situation, feared stigmatization outside of their faith communities, but also within their faith communities, although for different reasons. Those who had adopted an affirming approach to non-heterosexual orientation struggled with the genuine belief within the faith communities that sexual orientation changes are possible and something one should strive for if experiencing same sex attraction. This effectively stigmatized, or even excluded them from their faith communities, since they either found changing their sexual orientation impossible, or something they simply did not want to or did not feel like they should attempt.

6.3 Application of the Study and Future Research

Without dismissing the positive experiences some report with sexual orientation change efforts, one simply cannot ignore the problematic setting of communities where views on sexual orientation are so strictly normative, that those outside the norm resort to seeking solutions even through potentially harmful methods, for which there is no evidence of success, such as sexual orientation change efforts. In faith communities people often experience a strong need for belonging and would naturally be inclined to comply with and relate positively to suggestions by church leaders or Christian counselors regarding personal matters. In this study many participants described discussions or ministry sessions with sexual orientation change discourse initially as positive and hope giving, because homosexuality was understood as such an abhorrent thing. However, this experience changed if they did not feel like they could succeed in changing their sexual orientation, or if they ended up not agreeing with the definition of success for these efforts. In these cases, the initial sense of hope turned into anguish and despair, which naturally impacted their wellbeing.

Another topic for discussion is the devastatingly all-encompassing repercussions that coming out with a non-heterosexual orientation in a heteronormative church can have on a person's life. This study sheds some light on the potential negative social repercussions, however the consequences of coming out with a non-heterosexual orientation in a heteronormative church can stretch further than just the social aspects of life. One of the participants I interviewed had a degree that only qualified them to work within a certain denomination or faith tradition, where all staff and leadership are expected to identify as heterosexual, or to remain single. This type of situation means that being openly gay and being open to romantic relationships or marriage with a person of the same sex, could effectively exclude you from employment that you are formally qualified for. Alternatively, choosing to remain single in order to avoid losing out on job opportunities, or in order to avoid other negative repercussions, could mean giving up on close, romantic relationships and having a family. Under these circumstances, people are left with very limited options, making choices with severe implications on their lives, potentially without receiving adequate support in gauging the significance of their choices. This is something that should raise grave ethical concerns. A question then is, who should it concern? A simple answer could be "anyone and everyone". Even though only a minority of the population is directly affected by this phenomenon, I would argue that the surrounding issues of social justice and discrimination are so serious, that a deeper and broader understanding of the challenges facing same sex attracted persons within heteronormative faith communities would be warranted at a societal level. Particularly those within church leadership, social and health services, as well as other public services would do well in broadening their understanding of these issues.

There are a lot of academically unexplored topics, at least within social psychology, relating to the research question of this study. Sexual orientation change efforts, for example, is an issue that was intricately intertwined with this study, but could be explored further on its own, through further study within the context of Finnish Christian faith communities. Studies could focus specifically on interpretative repertoires regarding sexual orientation change efforts, and the participants could be regular church members, or church leadership. Of course, this topic could also be studied with another theoretical and methodological approach. One could for example study social representations of sexual orientation change efforts, or social

representations simply of sexual orientation, or gender identity, within heteronormative Christian faith communities in Finland. It would be interesting to see if there are significant differences in social representations or interpretative repertoires regarding sexual orientation, gender identity, or sexual orientation change efforts between different age groups.

Further studies could also focus on wellbeing, or the responsibility for wellbeing, in relation to non-heterosexual orientation. An interesting topic would be to study how church leaders within heteronormative Christian faith communities in Finland view their responsibility for the wellbeing of church members dealing with unwanted same sex attraction, especially when engaging in sexual orientation change efforts, especially if having been counseled to do so by church leadership or staff.

Hopefully, this study could have even a small impact in opening up discussion on how persons experiencing same sex attraction could be helped within heteronormative faith communities without such strong, normative expectations on how they should approach their sexual orientation, and without them being stigmatized within or outside their faith communities.

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Appendix

Interview Structure

In your own words, how would you define your gender, and your sexual orientation? (Please tell me why you use these specific terms? Is there anything else you would like to say about this?)

What church do you go to, or did you last go to?
Please give a general description of this church / these churches: general atmosphere, focus of teaching, views on personal relationships, etc.

Based on your church background, how would you describe a good Christian? (If different, please describe your own opinion vs. how you understand the views of your church)

What did you learn in church about romantic relationships or marriage between people of the same sex? (Through sermons, prayer ministry, personal relationships, and other encounters in church)

How did this doctrine and these views of same sex relationships affect you and your life choices?
(Feelings, views on your own position in church and before God. Where do you now fit in? What are your options?)

Is there anything you would like to change about what you were taught on this topic or how it was taught to you? What was right and what was wrong?

Especially with regards to your sexual orientation, where do you feel you can be most comfortable and most transparently yourself?
(With family, friends, significant other, in church, with Christians or non-Christians, at work, engaging in hobbies, on social media, etc.)

How do you explain the difference in how comfortable you are in these different social settings?

Did you ever seek any kind of help for difficult experiences relating to this topic?
(Christian counseling, reparative therapy, psychotherapy, support group, psychiatric care, other)
How was your experience of the help you received?